

COMMUNICATING COMMITMENT WITHIN MONOGAMOUS ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS

Alaina Nicole Leverenz

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Master's Thesis Committee

Elizabeth Goering, PhD, Chair

Maria Brann, PhD, MPH

Kim White-Mills, PhD

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This study sought to better understand the communication of commitment in monogamous romantic relationships, including how one communicates his/her commitment to his/her partner and how one interprets messages from his/her partner. Focusing on the fundamentals of communicating commitment to one's partner proves beneficial in understanding the commitment processes in daily life. In an effort to understand this concept, I used themes from interdependence theory and the investment model to formulate the interview questions and develop the findings. The findings and interpretations demonstrate that couples are communicating their commitment to each other in words/verbal expressions, especially in the beginning stages of the committed relationship; the commitment global construct employed most to communicate commitment in relationship is relational maintenance behaviors; and people perceive that nonverbal expressions of commitment are the best way to interpret messages of commitment from one's partner.

Elizabeth Goering, PhD, Chair

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“A fundamental assumption underlying the formation of our most important relationships is that they will persist indefinitely into the future” (Adam & Jones, 1999, p. ix). Twenty years later, and this concept still remains true; people start relationships assuming there is a future. Humans are born to connect with one another and create relationships for survival. Lieberman (2014) even goes so far as to claim that human connection is as important to life as food, water, and shelter. To reap the most benefit from these important relationships, it is crucial to understand which relationships are worth continuing and how to ensure they continue. The desire to continue a relationship is inherently tied to commitment.

Although there is little agreement among communication scholars about what commitment is (Adams, 1999), for this study, commitment will be defined as the intent to persist in the relationship and feelings of psychological attachment (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Rusbult, & Agnew, 1998). This definition provides the underlying understanding that commitment is a serious, intentional, and binding process to another. A word of this magnitude applying to one’s most important relationships has the potential to create great peace and security or stress and uncertainty.

Transitioning an academic definition to daily life can lead to some discrepancy. From the general concept, each individual then creates his/her own interpretation of what the word commitment means. This connotative definition comes from experiences, emotions, and interactions that build from the base definition and transitions to practical application. Not only that, but scholars of psychology, communication, anthropology, and various other disciplines have spent years researching and sculpting the concept of

commitment as well. Scholars have expanded on the concept of commitment by applying emotional needs and attachment styles, reviewing cultural and period references, or looking at how commitment plays out in life today.

These studies have found that there is not one single concept of commitment understood or adhered to by every individual (Etherton & Beach 1999; Fehr, 1998; Foster, 2008) or scholar (Adams & Jones, 1999). There are many means employed to understand commitment. One concept shared by all parties is that feeling and expressing commitment is a vital part of life and human existence.

The intent of this study is to understand how individuals communicate commitment to their partner and how they feel their partner communicates commitment to them. For the purposes of this study, I focused specifically on monogamous romantic relationships. Much research has been done on relational commitment already (Adam & Jones 1999; Aldrich & Morrison, 2010; Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1999; Drigotas, Rusbult, and Verette, 1999; O’Riordan, 2007; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Sahlstein & Baxter, 2001; Thompson-Hays & Webb, 2004; Weigel, 2008; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2002), but there is only a small amount of research that focuses on the overall verbal and nonverbal communication of interpersonal commitment to one’s romantic partner and how the partner interprets the messages, without considering any other factors (i.e. effect on, mutuality of, processes of, level changes).

It is important for the scholarship to finally have an accepted, general understanding of how individuals are sending and receiving messages of commitment at a basic level in order to gain congruity in the discipline and allow for more practical application. There are discrepancies among the scholarship regarding the concept of

commitment (e.g., are commitment feelings created as the relationship persists or does the relationship persist because of commitment feelings?) which allows for much interpretation.

There was a call to action 20 years ago for researchers to strive for this type of understanding. In the *Handbook of Interpersonal Commitment and Relationship Stability*, it reads, “The clear message of the foregoing section is that in order for the commitment literature to advance most efficiently, it is necessary first to direct efforts toward resolving and enduring conceptual and measurement issues” (Adams, 1999, p. 507). This statement follows more than 500 pages of various commitment research that looked at commitment and other theoretically relevant variables. And it is a call that has still, to this day, not been answered.

There are several models that strive to describe commitment processes. These can be applied to resolve the conceptual issues. This study uses interdependence theory and the investment model of interpersonal relationships to analyze and refine the communication of commitment and interpretation of messages to provide a broad, foundational concept of communicating commitment that can then be translated and applied.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The primary theoretical concept guiding this investigation is the investment model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). A significant number of researchers have found great success in using the investment model concepts to understand interpersonal relationships. According to Segal and Fraley (2016), the investment model is one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding committed relationships. Davis (1999) claims the investment model is “empirically robust” (p. 235) in its ability to predict relational duration, and several scholars have studied commitment specifically using interdependence theory and the investment model (Aldrich & Morrison, 2010). The investment model provides the necessary theoretical foundation for this study on interpersonal commitment to build upon. Previous interpersonal communication research demonstrates that commitment is linked to interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and the investment model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). The following subsections provide a review of the literature that examines commitment through the lenses of interdependence theory and the investment model.

Interdependence theory

Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) suggests relational dependence directly relates to the continuation of the relationship and having strong interdependence between partners demonstrates love and commitment (Kelley, 1983). Dependence is representative of commitment and “between-person relations are as meaningful as the individual themselves” (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008, p. 2050; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). This theory is focused solely on the between-people

interactions and is not focused on the individual (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

Though this study interviews individuals, the interview questions and participant answers are focused on the interactions within the relationship. Therefore, this theory helps provide the framework for a study aimed to understand committed, monogamous (dyadic), relationships.

Formed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), interdependence theory stems from social psychology. The formulation of this theory began with a framework of general social and relational themes such as: rules and norms, dependence and power, and coordination and cooperation (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). Then Kelley and Thibaut (1978) presented a more in-depth and comprehensive study that highlighted further social and relationship themes such as: trust and distrust, conflict and communication, and risk and self-regulation (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). These themes provided the ability to analyze how interdependence theory captures social life and presents a framework for understanding social interactions (Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). This is a theory that analyzes basic human interactions and social activities and uses this data to produce a significant theoretical framework that guides future research.

The logic and structure of interdependence theory claims that to predict the outcome of an interaction between two individuals, one must consider what situation the individuals are faced with and a “person’s needs, thoughts, and motives with respect to this interaction” (Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011, p. 252). It demonstrates that if an interaction gratifies important needs, then it is considered satisfying by the individual. Interactions can lead to both concrete and symbolic outcomes (Rusbult & Van Lange,

1996; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). For example, if a couple disagrees on what to eat for dinner, and one partner suggests they cook the other partner's favorite meal, that partner not only gets the concrete benefit of eating their favorite meal but also the symbolic benefit of knowing their partner is attentive to their needs. Everyday situations present interpersonal problems and possibilities. This theory analyzes how possible behaviors can affect situation outcomes and identify the degree and type of dependence (Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). Providing these nuances in the logic and structure of the theory allows for easier theoretical development and practical application of this concept.

Social interaction is the focus of interdependence theory which one can conclude from the themes (i.e. rules and norms, dependence and power, and coordination and cooperation; trust and distrust, conflict and communication, and risk and self-regulation) (Thibaut Kelley, 1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Van Lange and Rusbult, 2011) and structure (i.e., to predict the outcome of an interaction between two individuals). In expansion of this, Kelley and Thibaut (1978) also presented how individual motives are actually created within the interpersonal reality itself. Van Lange and Rusbult (2011) add to this claim in their statement, "interaction is the heart of where people live their social lives" (p. 252). Many scholars conclude that an individual's feelings, emotions, beliefs, and thoughts are actually created throughout these social interactions as well (Duck, 1992; Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2014; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). This concept also demonstrates how individual needs, motives, processes, uncertainty reduction, belonging, and self-regulations are formed through their interactions with others; and more specifically, with their close, interpersonal partners. In line with the interpersonal reality and commitment, Van Lange and Rusbult (2011) claim, "Commitment can only be

understood in terms of social interaction” (p. 252). Social interaction is not only the focus of this concept, but also the means to understand humans and their expressions of commitment.

Another concept presented in interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) relative to commitment and relational duration is situation selection. Situational selection is basically choosing to enter or avoid a situation due to consideration of one’s partner. Knowing when to enter or avoid the correct situations with regard to one’s partner can lead to longer relational duration and enhanced commitment. In other words, situational selection is functional and aims to meet needs and/or contribute to a long-term relational outcome (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Snyder & Ickes, 1985; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). Situational selection considers the choice of benefiting one’s partner at a low-risk to oneself versus benefitting oneself at a high-cost/high-risk to one’s partner (Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). For example, a woman knows her partner enjoys her company after a long day at work. Her partner enjoys watching sports on television; whereas, she is not particularly interested in this activity. In order to be considerate of both her partner’s needs and her own, she sits in the living room with her partner but brings a book to read. Therefore, the couple can be in one another’s company, and with limited individual sacrifice. Her partner gets to watch his sports, they get to be in each other’s presence, and the woman gets to do something she is interested in as well. This concept demonstrates dynamic communication within the interpersonal relationship and has a focus on long-term relational outcome (i.e., an influence on relational commitment). If the woman simply chose not to be in her

partner's presence just because he wanted to watch sports, it could cause relational turbulence and lead to relational problems.

Aside from the inherent theme of commitment throughout interdependence theory, there are two key constructs that support this study's rationale, satisfaction level and quality of alternatives. Since these key constructs are particularly important to this study, they will be discussed in further detail. Satisfaction level is the extent to which an individual's important needs are met by their partner (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Satisfaction can also be summarized as the general positive versus negative feelings experienced in the relationship. Satisfaction is an influencer on relational sustainability, but it is not the only one. Interdependence theory also presents quality of alternatives as an influencer of relational sustainability. Quality of alternatives refers to the perception that an individual is in the best relationship possible. The individual does not feel their needs could be met better by another or that there is a better partner out there for them. This also includes having a partner that is maybe not satisfactory, but the individual feels they have no other options. Satisfaction and quality of alternatives will be highlighted again in the investment model portion of the literature review.

From the initial creation in 1959 by Thibaut and Kelley, this theory has been tested and expanded in many ways. Through theoretical expansion and even decades later, it was predicted the impact of this theory would be durable (Jones, 1999). And now, nearly six decades of research since its formation, it provides a supporting framework for this study and many others (Kelley et al., 2003; Kim & Sharkey, 2009; Ledbetter & Mazer, 2014; Leverenz & Brann, 2018; Lewis, McBride, Pollak, Puleo, Butterfield & Emmons, 2006; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Rusbult & Van

Lange, 1996; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). Van Lange and Rusbult (2011) suggest that interdependence theory is very useful in understanding how relationships persist and sustain.

Creating a sustainable, lasting relationship relies on the interpersonal structures and processes presented by interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kelley et al., 2003; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011). The processes highlighted in this theory are crucial to forming an understanding of interpersonal commitment, and they provide a structure which other scholars can, and have, expanded; including the areas of level of dependence, mutuality of dependence, and basics of dependence. It also presents interdependence as a process that happens throughout the relationship. It has been used to understand the relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002), the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), models of attachment (Collins & Feeney, 2004; Fraley & Shaver, 2000), trust (Holmes, & Rempel, 1989; Insko & Schopler, 1998), close-relationship betrayal (Finkel et al., 2002), and even group decision and conflict research (Baron & Kerr, 2003; Bornstein, 1992, De Dreu, 2010; Hertel et al., 2000). Interdependence theory and its capabilities were explained in depth because the investment model, which will be discussed in the next section, emerged from interdependence theory.

The investment model

The main theoretical model for this study is the investment model. The investment model uses interdependence constructs to analyze relational persistence (Kelley, 1979; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult, Matz, & Agnew, 1998; Thibaut &

Kelley, 1959) and expands on interdependence theory in two main areas (Rusbult, 1980, 1983).

The first expansion is that the investment model demonstrates dependence is not solely explained by satisfaction and quality of alternatives; some relationships can last even when better alternatives are available (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). This finding directly led to the second expansion. The investment model now presents a third variable, the concept of investment size. Investment size refers to the resources attached to a relationship, it assumes these resources are important and would be lost after the relationship ends (Becker, 1960; Rubin & Brockner, 1975; Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998; Staw, 1976; Teger, 1980; Tropper, 1972).

As relationships exist, the individuals slowly share parts of themselves, whether it be time, money, friends, resources, efforts, personal thoughts, etc. There are both direct and indirect resources associated with the relationship after its creation. Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) claim, “invested resources presumably enhance commitment because the act of investment increases the costs of ending a relationship, serving as a powerful psychological inducement to persist” (p. 359). Investment size looks at the importance of the resources attached to the relationship and if any would decline in value or be lost at the relational end (Becker, 1960; Rubin & Brockner, 1975; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Staw, 1976; Teger, 1980; Tropper, 1972). The state of relying on one’s partner and/or the resources associated with them relates to commitment in romantic relationships.

The investment model further extends interdependence theory by suggesting that as dependence increases feelings of commitment will emerge (Rusbult, Martz, &

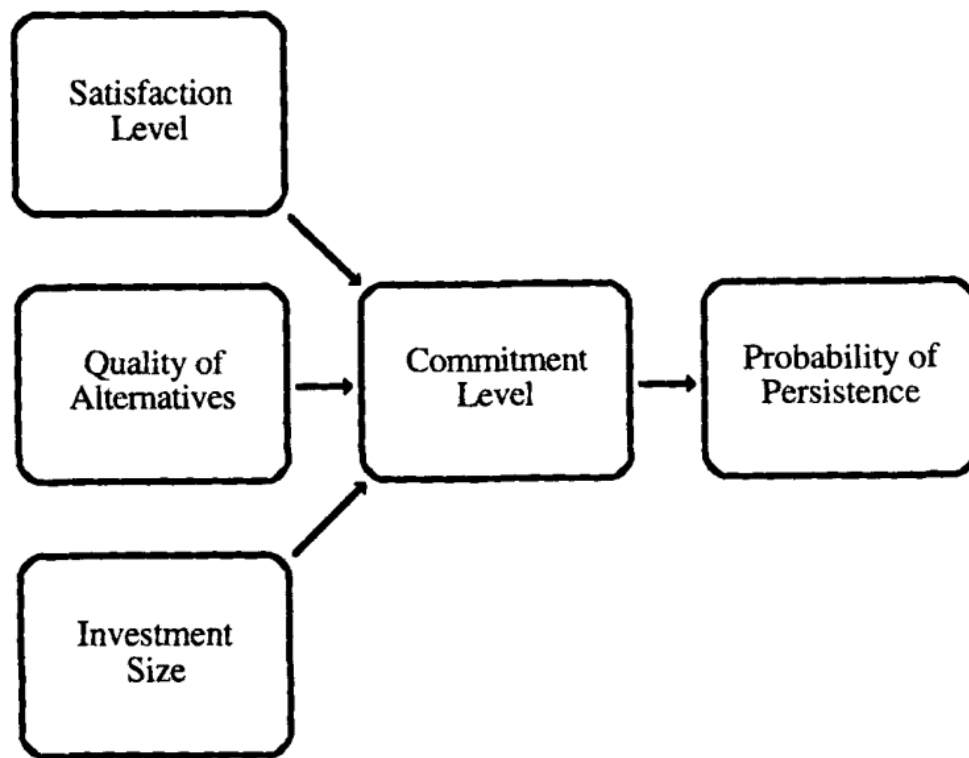
Agnew, 1998). Out of all the constructs highlighted in interdependence theory and the investment model, the construct of commitment is most important to this study. As aforementioned, commitment is defined as the intent to persist the relationship and feelings of psychological attachment (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Rusbult, & Agnew, 1998). The construct of commitment differs from the construct of interdependence; interdependence is a “fundamental quality” (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998, p. 360) of a relationship whereas commitment develops after the individual has become increasingly dependent on their partner. Commitment has also been described in the Rusbult literature (1980, 1983, 1998) as an allegiance or loyalty to the individual. Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) also claim, “Commitment is the psychological construct that directly influences everyday behavior in relationships, including decisions to persist—that is, commitment mediates the effects on persistence of the three bases of dependence,” (p. 360). The literature shows commitment has been positively correlated with investment size and negatively correlated with quality of alternatives (Lange et al., 1997; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Understanding commitment within close, interpersonal relationships is crucial for creating rewarding monogamous, romantic partnerships.

Other studies have used the investment model constructs to understand romantic relationships (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Buunk, 1987; Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, & Gaines, 1997; Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Kurdek, 1991, 1993; Lin & Rusbult, 1995; Lund, 1985; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985; Simpson, 1987; South & Lloyd, 1995; Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga,

Witcher, & Cox, 1997; White, 1980) focusing on both heterosexual and homosexual romantic relationships, similar to this study.

Overall, the investment model by Rusbult et al. (1998) thoroughly explains the processes of commitment and provides the foundation for this research to understand communication of commitment. It is considered in this model that high ranking in the three variable areas (relational satisfaction and happiness, the quality of alternatives, and the investment into the partnership) would increase an individual's commitment size and lead to the continuation of the relationship, as well as lead to more communicative acts of commitment. It is shown that satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment size lead to commitment level which leads to the probability of persistence, (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The investment model, (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).



More specifically, the commitment global constructs (see Appendix 1) were identified by Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) and include the constructs: commitment to maintaining the relationship, desire for relationship to last, feelings of attachment to the relationship, lack of desire to date someone other than their current partner, and sadness if the relationship were to end. These constructs provide the ability to better categorize the communication behaviors that express these innate relational feelings. Therefore, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: How do individuals communicate commitment to their romantic partner?

And, to provide more nuanced findings and interpretations for RQ1 using the framework of the Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) commitment global constructs, the following research question was posed:

RQ1.1: Which of the commitment constructs are communicated most?

Interpreting commitment messages

Commitment communication is both sharing a message with one's partner and the partner's interpretation of the message. In further detail, commitment is a process of ongoing interactions (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1999; Gergen, 1994; Shotter, 1993; Walther, 1992) and behavioral interpretations by the partners (Yerby, 1995). Behavioral interpretations can leave margin for error when understanding the commitment from one's partner. Noting the complexities of the process of commitment, one can further understand the communication of commitment by striving to understand not only how the communication is felt and expressed, but also received.

It is possible the perception of commitment is unclear because the commitment to one's romantic partner can come from a variety of internal and external sources: oral,

personal, social, structural, cultural, etc. Perceived commitment provides the assumption that commitment exists within the relationship and allows the relationships to progress into the future. Successfully perceived commitment can predict relational stability, communication quality, and problem solving (Adam & Jones 1999; Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Rusbult, 1983; Sacher & Fine, 1996).

However, perceiving that commitment exists within the relationship is only the first step of interpreting the interpersonal commitment within the relationship. Commitment is both directly and indirectly communicated (Knapp & Taylor, 1994) which provides even more uncertainty in the interpretation of commitment. And that frequent connection is necessary to form a close relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1988) as well as the continuation and progression of the relationship. These repeated interactions can help reduce uncertainty and increase the likelihood of accurate understanding of commitment expressed.

Commitment can also be demonstrated from decisions like getting married, taking a new job, joining a church (Janis & Mann, 1997; Leik, et al., 1999; Tallman, et al., 1991) which, due to social constructs, have a higher likelihood of being perceived accurately. These choices are also in the category of nonverbal communication. The perception of commitment can also develop unconsciously, leaving much room for interpretation. The scholarship continually points to the conclusion that these expressions are a dynamic and ongoing process. This means not only are the communications of commitment characterized by constant change, but the interpretations of that commitment can be at a constant change as well.

Ballard-Reish and Weigel (1999) demonstrate communication has a prominent role in commitment and claim that identifying communicative commitment behaviors is central to understanding commitment in relationships. The literature does not address the interpretation of the entirety of the communication and behavioral aspects of interpersonal relationships (Weigel & Ballard-Reish, 2002). Although there seems to be a lot of information on relational commitment, questions still exist of how partners are expressing commitment, and how partners are interpreting these messages. Therefore, the following research question was posed:

RQ2: How do individuals interpret messages of commitment they receive from their partner?

Chapter 3: Method

In this study, qualitative methods were employed to understand how individuals communicate and interpret commitment in monogamous, romantic dyads. Individuals in committed relationships were recruited via online channels (i.e., Usenet posting and tweets on Twitter using relationship hashtags) and asked to participate in interviews about their commitment to their partner. The interviews took 10-45 minutes to complete (M= 22 minutes).

Participants

The 12 participants recruited for the interviews ranged in age from 22-65 years (M = 35, Mode = 27). The participants included nine females and three males. The ethnic makeup was 11 Caucasian/not Hispanic or Latino and one mixed race/not Hispanic or Latino. Participant committed relationship types included two dating relationships, two engaged, and eight married. The relationships that were reported have lasted from three months to 46 years (M = 13 years and 8 months). There were four sets of committed partners in the population, one engaged and three married, which affects the mean of relationship type and length. Ten participants were in heterosexual relationships, and two participants were in lesbian/homosexual relationships. There were 10 individual interviews and one couple interviewed in a pair.

Materials

The interview guide was created using commitment global constructs from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998). I used the definition of commitment from Rusbult and Agnew (1998), and Agnew, and Van Lange, Rusbult, and Langston (1998) which describes commitment as the intent to persist in the relationship and having feelings of

psychological attachment. The same definition of commitment used in the literature review was used for participant interviews as well. This definition was presented at the beginning of the interview to provide participants with a general understanding of commitment before I began questioning. The participant was asked to answer the rest of the questions with that definition in mind.

Similar studies (Leverenz & Brann, 2018; Weigel, 2008) have also provided participants with contextual information prior to questioning. The definition was shared to make sure the participants discuss communication of commitment and not something else (e.g., love, affection, admiration, care). The Appendices provide further breakdown of the theoretical rationale behind the interview questions (see Appendix 1) and the interview guide (see Appendix 2).

Data collection materials

After participants were recruited, I scheduled an interview with each individual person. Interviews were conducted in-person, over the phone, and through a video chatting platform. Because these interviews were not focused on physical or visual nonverbal behaviors, interviewing over the phone still provided the data necessary to address the research objective. I sent the study information sheet (see Appendix 3) to each participant via email prior to meeting.

Participants were asked to read the emailed information about the study and confirm with me that they were willing to continue with the interview. Then the interview was scheduled. At the time of the interview, I introduced myself and begin the audio recording. The interviews were conducted using the open-ended questions on the interview guide (see Appendix 2). During the interview, I used discretion to ask any

additional probing questions, all of which were noted and transcribed. I took notes during the interviews as well. The audio was transcribed following the interview for the analysis. Any and all information shared by the participant throughout the scheduled meeting was available for use in the data analysis for this study: e.g., if an individual shared a story or other item about the relational commitment prior to the start of audio recording, it is still eligible for use in this study. This action was approved by the Indiana University institutional review board.

Data analysis procedures

After each individual interview, I transcribed the audio recording. I then read the transcription one to three times (Tracy, 2013). I also revisited the research questions, as reviewing the questions throughout ensures the data stays relevant. Then I began coding following the first interview. Coding is the process where a researcher labels and organizes the data (Tracy, 2013) and codes can sometimes be referred to as “theme” or “category” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Tracy, 2013). For this specific study, the terms code and theme will be used interchangeably. I then opened the empty code table (see Table 1) in Microsoft Word and began the data coding process. Most qualitative researchers wait to code until about three quarters through data collection (Tracy, 2013). However, because this research project uses member reflections for credibility and reliability, the coding process began immediately after each individual interview.

Table 1. Researcher's codebook

Abbreviation	Code	Definition/Explanation	Examples	Notes
First-level codes				
Second-level codes				

I made this choice intentionally to create a more dynamic process and avoid any added subjectivity. Choosing to interview, analyze, reflect, and validate each individual interview in the order they were scheduled ensured I primarily focused on the apparent emerging themes for the individual and not just generalizing the entire study. The step for the finalized themes occurred after the participant validated his/her own themes, created by me, using the member reflections process. This process will be further described in the later paragraphs, beginning on page 21.

Beginning with the first interview, I used iterative analysis procedures (Bloor, 2001; Ellis, 2007; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Tracy, 2013) and constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006) to code the data into first- and second-level codes. Iterative analysis was chosen because it “encourages reflection upon the active interest, current literature, granted priorities and various theories” (Tracy, 2013, p.184) and allows for emergent data (Plec, 2013; Tracy, 2013). The processes of iterative analysis will be further explained in the following paragraphs.

The first part of this coding process was to develop first-level codes, which are more general and descriptive codes found in the transcriptions. These codes are the

general who, what, and where (Tracy, 2013) of the interview transcriptions. At this point in time, I had read the transcription one to three times through and had my electronic coding table open on my computer for notes. I then read the transcription with the “who, what, where” lens and began copying and pasting quotes from the interview transcription into the coding table. It is important to make use of the actual words and phrases from the transcription when making these codes. As I was adding quotations and creating the first-level codes in my Word document, I was also making notes of possible codes or literature support for later use. Using constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006) I began to notice and compare the codes I was documenting and started to assess if I should combine the two codes or create a new code. I continued to compare, review and refine the first-level codes throughout the duration of the transcription reading. I also used font color and highlighting features in Word to indicate potential patterns or interesting quotations to use for support. The iterative approach “does not require that the entire corpus of data be put through a fractured and detailed primary-coding cycle,” (Tracy, 2013, p. 190) however, I concluded that the first-level codes are fundamentally important to creating more accurate second-level codes.

After completing the first-level codes, I reviewed the codes created and revisited the research questions again to assess the direction of the study. This provided an opportunity for any additional insights or necessary redirection. I noticed themes from the literature were present in the initial coding results. I also noticed there was significant overlap in the answers for maintaining the relationship and discussing a long-term future and planned to keep this in mind for her second-level coding. The results were

satisfactorily saturated, and I concluded there was no redirection needed. Therefore, I began the second-level codes.

This process began by examining the codes created in the primary-coding cycle. Then I began to organize and categorize them into the emerging concepts (Tracy, 2013). As “who, what, where” was the focus on the first-level codes, the “why” became the focus for the second-level codes. These codes are more focused and better explain and expand upon the data. Using iterative analysis (Bloor, 2001; Ellis, 2007; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Tracy, 2013) allowed for the influence of theory and constructs from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) and Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, and Langston (1998) parallel at this step, throughout the constant comparison, and creation of the second-level codes. To reiterate, Tracy (2013) explains that second-level codes are generated using “interpretive creativity” and theoretical knowledge” (p. 195). This was where I was able to allow the themes presented in the interview to take shape within the framework of the investment model’s commitment global constructs.

At this point, I had my coding table open and the first-level codes filled. I read the first-level codes and considered the individual’s motivation behind the claim. I compared the code to the theoretical concepts and definitions expressed in this study (Rusbult, & Agnew, 1998; Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). And I began compiling the second-level codes, filling out the bottom of the code book. I dynamically identified patterns, groups, and/or themes within the emerging data. I compared and contrasted the data, consider the subjectivity and context of the claims, and synthesized these constructs into the appropriate second-level codes. I used the commitment constructs from the investment model in my second-level table and allowed for them to form shape

organically from the quotations, phrases, and sentences shared by the participants. I was also able to take her initial table notes into consideration as she coded.

Second-level coding can sometimes suggest additional data is needed. This was not the case for this study. There was satisfactory saturation (Bloor & Wood, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in the literature themes, and emerging themes from the interviews themselves. Saturation is a phase of qualitative data analysis when the concepts in the theory are fully developed and no new data emerges (Bloor & Wood, 2006; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Given, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, I did not need to review the interview guide (see Appendix 2) and adjust for more robust data moving forward. Theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was not assessed on the individual-participant level but was assessed once more interviews were conducted. Related studies have also demonstrated theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) after a similar number of interviews (Avtgis, Anderson, & West, 1998; Suojanen et al., 2018; Weigel, 2003; Young & Curran, 2009).

After reaching satisfactory second-level codes for the individual interview transcript, I used the process of member reflections to create reliability. Though the concept of reliability is framed differently in qualitative research (Tracy, 2013), the member reflections step was taken to ensure the production of accurate codes. The member reflections step created the reliability and validity that is more often created in qualitative research by using multiple coders (Berends & Johnston, 2009; MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1994; Tracy, 2013; Zahng & Wildemuth, 2017).

I followed the member reflection processes listed in Tracy (2013, p. 239). The member reflection process allowed for collaboration with the research participant and

provide opportunity for additional insight. Due to human nature and personal connotations, it is important to make sure the codes are valid as possible. The process of including participant input post-interview ensures subjective responses will be assessed and reviewed in a more credible way (Ellis, 2007). Bloor (2001) also demonstrates that new data can be produced from this process as well, providing deeper and richer analysis.

To begin the member reflections process, I sent each participant an email explaining that I had analyzed the interview and compiled a list of codes, which were explained as “themes” I felt represented the participant’s responses. Though I had created two levels of codes at this point, I only listed the second-level codes in the document I shared. The Word document had the name of the code, the definition, and the verbatim examples of words, phrases, and sentences from the interview. I instructed the participant to respond to each theme and either: confirm the accuracy, move the quotation to another theme, delete the quotation or theme entirely, or provide a sentence that better explains what the individual was trying to express.

Seven participants confirmed the themes were valid as-is. Three participants moved their quotations to different themes; two of these three actually moved the same phrase under different themes, with long-term future and maintaining the relationship as the most common quotation change and duplication. One participant deleted a sentence that was used under duplicate themes, leaving it under the theme they felt fit best. And only one participant, the individual whose interview was cut short due to emotion, added additional examples. The researched accepted the changes provided by the participants (Tracy, 2013). There is not a percent agreement for member reflection validated themes.

Conducting member reflections is a stronger reliability and validity procedure than other participant-based validation such as member checks, member validation, or host verification (Tracy, 2013) because it focuses on providing the space for additional insight and credibility, and not just emphasizing the need for correspondence. There was not much additional insight provided by the participants for this particular study. This could be credited to coder accuracy, lack of interest from participant, or misunderstanding/confusion of participant (Tracy, 2010).

The data analysis procedures explained in the preceding paragraphs were completed on all 12 of the research participants before I began the full analysis. This was a logical structure for the study because the member reflections were performed to provide reliability, as inter-coder reliability would be measured with multiple coders on a study (Lavrakas, 2008). The research participants needed to confirm accuracy of the individual codes before the data could be analyzed in its entirety. I began coding after at least five participants; however, the 12 participants were scheduled very quickly and closely together so the entirety of the coding process happened over the course of a month.

Tracy (2013) allows for several rounds of secondary coding. For the full study analysis, I used a similar codebook (see Table 2), with all of the second-level codes from the individual interviews populating the top half. I then repeated the second-level coding process on the existing second-level codes to compare, contrast and synthesize to create what this paper refers to as “third-level” codes. This third-level process is still in line with the iterative analysis flowchart (Tracy, 2013, p. 218). It was found that many of the

second-level codes from the individual interviews easily assimilated into larger codes and matched the literature.

Table 2. Researcher's codebook II

Abbreviation	Code	Definition/Explanation	Examples	Notes
Individual second-level codes				
Third-level codes/Full second-level codes				

I used the validated third-level codes and corresponding research questions to make meaning of the codes produced. As Tracy (2013) instructs, I returned to the research questions after several rounds of secondary coding, and before third-level coding. I noted the high saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) under the theoretical themes, and the high level of duplication and decided that the final codes should be organized by literature themes with sub-codes. I created an analysis outline (Tracy, 2013) with the research questions and final codes to identify which codes explain the research questions or provide an interesting pursuit toward more conclusive results. Then, in line with iterative analysis, I used the research questions, final codes, and existing literature to draft the findings and interpretations section.

Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretations

This study assessed how individuals communicate commitment to their partner, which commitment global constructs are used most, and how partners interpret messages of commitment. The data derived from the 12 interviews was coded to create insight with the foundation of the literature reviewed in this study and present new themes of communication of commitment. The results below demonstrate how partners are sending and receiving messages of commitment, and how they make sense of these messages.

RQ1

The iterative analysis for the first research question, *How do individuals communicate commitment to their romantic partner?*, revealed four themes that developed from the dataset: *talk/words*, *show/acts of service*, *institution of marriage*, and *mutuality of commitment* (see Table 3).

The general concept of communicating commitment demonstrated how the partners express their commitment to one another. It seemed to be inherently understood that one's partner was committed to them. One married male shared, "She's always committed. She will always be, I feel like." Another married female shared, "But I never in my mind, ever thought that would be the possibility just from his character and our experience together." It was collectively understood that the commitment existed. It was also very clear throughout all the interviews how fond the participants were of their partners. They talked about their commitment and time with their romantic partner in a very loving and sure manner; including a light tone and emphasizing hand gestures.

Participants found it very challenging to identify how they communicate commitment to their romantic partner. Many of the participants who were farther along in

their relationship, (e.g., engaged, married), disclosed their engagement or wedding as a communication of commitment. When I asked if they felt committed before the marriage, every participant said yes of course. I probed commitment examples from earlier in their relationship. The codes in the following table demonstrate only the results in regard to the general question of how individuals communicate their commitment to their partner.

Table 3. How individuals communicate commitment: codes, descriptions, examples

Code	Description	Examples
<i>Talk / Words</i>	Words used to express commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I tell her I couldn't live without her and I couldn't function without her. • I think the day he said, "I'm all in" actually it was like, that was that. • I will say both of us, were kind of like, hey, I really you, we liked each other. We do verbally for sure
<i>Show/ Acts of services</i>	Actions that lead to unspoken understandings of commitment within the partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • And even like financial um uh commitments like paying for concert tickets or we're going on a trip this weekend and like he paid for half the groceries and like paid, you know, like he is going to pay for gas and it's all those things that to me show commitment. • He showed me his commitment in a lot of ways... emotionally... we'll call each other when we don't see each other.
<i>Institution of marriage</i>	Legally recognized union of two partners, usually through a wedding ceremony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When we got engaged, when he asked me to marry him and I made a commitment to him • I'd say we're more committed now, since we are engaged • When I proposed to her • When we said our vows
<i>Mutuality of commitment</i>	Both partners putting equal efforts into the relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think it probably wouldn't have worked out as well if we didn't [communicate in equal amounts] • I would say typically it's equal give and take type thing. • It's pretty much 50, 50.

The most saturated theme that emerged was the use of *talk/verbal strategies* to communicate or express commitment to one's partner. There was a high saturation of quotations from participants who commented on the changes over time that related to "talking about it," "having a talk," "a lot of discussions," and "verbal conversations." Many of the participants expressed the verbal expression of commitment occurred more throughout the initial stages of the relationship. Some participants shared that their communication of love, care, and commitment was expressed in similar ways, "One of the things we kind of say all the time to each other is like, like you're perfect for me kind of thing." Another shared, "I mean there was a lot of, I miss yous." Several of the participants in relationships of longer duration expressed the verbal expressions of commitment happened a lot more in the beginning of their relationship, whereas now it's more just understood from the previous verbal commitment and time together. These quotes were stated in a very sure and clear manner. It seemed to be unanimously expressed that communicating commitment verbally to their partner has been and always will be part of the relational dynamic.

The second most saturated theme that emerged was *showing commitment/acts of service* which are actions that lead to unspoken understandings of commitment within the partnership. This communication of commitment was expressed more in the relationships with longer duration. One participant shared it was not her acts within the relationship that showed commitment, but rather her choices outside of the pair. "I guess not in name, but like I was not seeing anybody else. I had deleted all my dating apps and...I was not interested in seeing anybody else," she shared. Many of the women in this study disclosed that their male partners demonstrated more commitment acts than words, "His

[communications of commitment] are acts,” “He’ll send me the link to the property and tell me why he liked it,” and “We’re going on a trip this weekend and like he paid for half the groceries and... he is going to pay for gas and it’s all those things that to me show commitment.” Though the participants did not recognize these commitment acts as a nonverbal behavior, the communication literature presents that acts of commitment are actually classified as nonverbal behaviors.

It is worth noting that nearly 75% of the participants made a point to share that their communication of commitment was a combination of the two, verbally expressing and showing commitment. A female participant disclosed, “It’s not just us leaving in the morning giving the other a kiss saying goodbye, it’s also talking throughout the day and telling each other we appreciate each other.” Out of the group that mentioned employing both strategies, it varied as to which, talking or showing, was brought up first. One usually flowed into a description of the other and then sometimes back again. I was surprised that not all of the participants described both but thought they may have described both if questioned on the two separately.

The third most saturated theme that emerged was the *institution of marriage*, which is a legally recognized union of two partners, usually through a wedding ceremony. When asked how they communicate their commitment, many participants shared “when I proposed,” “when I accepted his proposal,” “when he asked me to marry him,” “when we said our vows,” and various other marriage-related phrases. One woman expressed though they were committed prior to the engagement, “I’d say we’re more committed now, since we are engaged.” However, she also shared that she and her fiancé did move in together post-engagement, so finances or shared collateral could also have

influenced this claim. Commitment demonstrated from socially constructed decisions like getting married (Janis & Mann, 1997; Leik et al., 1999; Tallman et al., 1991) have a higher likelihood of being perceived accurately. This could be why all married couples listed their marriage first when asked about commitment, and then provided examples of verbal communication and actions after being probed. Participants included four pairs in the study, one engaged and three married, and in all eight interviews the participants listed the engagement or marriage as the communication of commitment, all first answers matched that of their partner though they were interviewed separately.

However, what I thought was initially just a theme of *institution of marriage*, soon began to emerge more as outward expressions of commitment. Outward being telling one or more persons outside of the relationship about the commitment within it. First, I would like to highlight the outward expressions of commitment to the public. It was very clear in this study that the participants felt accepting a marriage proposal or getting married was a very strong communicator of their commitment. Previous research (Piland, 1984) illustrated that “the act of getting married, and participating in a public ceremony, provides a framework through which the marriage relationship functions, and its commitment is given meaning” (p. 21). And other public expressions of commitment are also demonstrated in several studies (Janis & Mann, 1997; Leik et al., 1999; Tallman et al., 1991) that show social and cultural constructs, like marriage, have a higher likelihood of being perceived accurately. There is also a social media component to outward expressions, whether that is posting a picture of a significant other or linking to their profile from your page. It would be interesting to explore how expressing your commitment publicly can also inherently express commitment interpersonally. It's almost

like, “I am so committed to you, I want the world to know,” and the partner can feel more sure of oneself because of this public declaration. Other examples would be having children together, sharing finances, or even linking to each other’s social media profiles.

It was not just public expressions of commitment that are included in the outward expressions of commitment but telling one or any number of individuals outside the relationship about the commitment. An interesting anecdote that was brought up throughout the interviews was marriage counseling. Two women talked about how participating in marriage counseling prior to the marital commitment was an example of communicating commitment from both partners. One woman shared it was the topics they discussed in the counseling that aided in their commitment, “Before marriage we had counseling which hit on all the like that the financing, careers, household chores, and responsibilities...where do you want to live and who's going to raise children, and what kind of discipline you're looking at, and what kind of religion...the major things. And that's just something we touch on throughout the years.” Another woman shared that the act of attending counseling in itself reaffirmed her partner’s commitment, “We actually did some marriage counseling. And so, one of the things that was really impressed upon me and him is that our marriage is going to be the first and last.” The act of attending this counseling and telling another person outside their relationship of their intent to commit to one another strengthens the interpersonal commitment and would be worth further exploration. I wonder if the commitment levels would vary from interpersonal expression of commitment, telling one or more individuals about the commitment, and public expression of commitment.

The fourth and final theme that emerged for communicating commitment within the monogamous, romantic relationship is *mutuality of commitment* which is both partners putting in equal communicative effort. One participant shared, “I would say typically it's equal give and take type thing.” And a few participants shared that mutuality didn't always mean “equal” but rather providing more communication when his/her partner needed it and receiving that same support in return. For example, one participant shared, “I would say sometimes I show more of maybe like 60% more and then other times he may show more, depending on our moods or our days.” Another echoed that claim, “If it's a bad day, he does more or is more loving and those things for me.” Many participants shared their words and actions were mutually beneficial. The concept of mutuality is a part of interdependence theory, as explained in the literature review, and I found it interesting that it appeared as a code in the commitment results as well.

Mutuality was an important indicator of their partner's perceived commitment. It could be concluded from previous research and the couples in this study that mutuality is an inherent part of successfully committed relationships. If the efforts and communication are not mutual, equal or reciprocal, it can lead to uncertainty and dissatisfaction in the relationship (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). Satisfaction is positively correlated with commitment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998); therefore, dissatisfaction could indicate less relational commitment.

Many participants shared they strive to ensure their words and actions were mutually beneficial for both them and their partner. This is highlighted in a variety of ways throughout previous interpersonal communication research. In Van Lange and Rusbult (2011) it is highlighted that interdependence theory has a mutuality aspect as

well and if it is unbalanced, it could have negative relational effects. They state that interactions with more balance are usually safer and more stable, which I understand contributes to commitment. Previously, Drigotas, Rusbult, and Verette (1999) assessed commitment using interdependence theory, and they too found the mutuality of commitment was important for couple well-being. Weigel (2008) also looked at perceived mutuality of commitment and found “the greater the perceived degree of mutuality of commitment” (p. 32) the stronger the reported commitment. It would be worthwhile to explore the mutuality of attachment, commitment, power, and other variables and how that affects relational satisfaction and duration.

RQ 1.1

To address research question 1.1, *Which of the commitment constructs are communicated most?*, the iterative analysis revealed that *maintaining the relationship* was the most commonly used commitment construct; followed by *long-term future*, *lack of desire to date another*, and *sadness if the relationship were to end*. The commitment constructs *lack of desire to date another* and *sadness of relational end* were communicated significantly lower than the first two constructs, *maintaining the relationship* and *long-term future*.

For the purposes of this analysis, the codes were separated by commitment constructs and then divided in sub-codes or themes (see Table 4) with relation to the commitment global constructs (*maintaining the relationship*, *long-term future*, *lack of desire to date another*, *sadness related to relational end*). The themes of communicating commitment were more fully developed and nuanced by these sub-codes revealing themselves as we looked at the commitment global constructs.

Table 4. Most saturated commitment global constructs: sub-codes, descriptions, examples

Code	Description	Examples
Maintaining the Relationship: Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew (1998) commitment global items – communication of desire to maintain the relationship		
<i>Acts of Service</i> <i>*most saturated</i>	Demonstrating commitment through acts that benefit one's partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small acts of service... so, like cleaning up dinner or, you know, I'll do one of the chores that we agreed with hers just randomly, you know, there's little things like that giving, giving time and attention to, to the fact that we're in a relationship.
<i>Talk</i>	Demonstrating one's commitment through talking and discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> our relationship tends to be better if we're like talking about what we're feeling or like what's happening and things
<i>Shared Passions</i>	A commonality in passions or interests the two partners share	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find a passion that you share that's not physical, not, not a sexual passion. Find something that the two of you love so much that it can carry you through all the things you d
<i>Emotional Support</i>	When one partner listens to another's emotions without judgement or ridicule and provides support in return	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because you know, everyone takes love in a different way and, and having that love for one another and being aware of what they need is a commitment in itself.
<i>Jokes / Humor</i>	Qualities of being amusing or comic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We definitely play around in our relationship
<i>Affirmation</i>	Expression of approval, affirmation, admiration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He appreciates the verbal appreciation, the verbal acknowledgment of his acts of kindness She tells me she thanks me all the time for getting the chores or helping out where I can.
<i>Day-to-Day</i>	Communication that happens on a daily basis between partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's little things every day
<i>Large Life Events</i>	Communication that happens on special events and milestones between partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There's obviously the big things like, you know, going out for dinners on anniversaries and make things like that.

Long-term future: Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew (1998) commitment global items – communication of desire to maintain the relationship		
<i>Talk</i>	Topics of verbal discussions that are about the couple's future plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So if you're not talking about future or even present things, then that's a sign of not committing and, and we wholeheartedly talk about our future together
<i>Shared future goals</i>	Something both partners want in the future: i.e. kids, marriage, travel, location etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like getting married, you know, having kids, stuff like that. Like not trying to freak you out, but like that's what I can see, um, happening for me
<i>Care of partner's health/wellbeing /finances</i>	Making a point to communicate an interest in your partners wellbeing because you want them around for the rest of life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He's showing his commitment to me by, um, demonstrating ways of like shopping, healthier, cooking healthier food, helping me [with my health condition].
<i>Acts of shared future</i>	Acts that demonstrate a future together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He's met lots of my friends and I've met his friends.

Maintaining the relationship

Maintaining the relationship comes from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) commitment global constructs (see Appendix 1), the communication of desire to maintain the relationship. Many participants share they maintain their relationship in a variety of ways. One said, "I think a healthy balance of both [talking and showing] commitment." Some shared it was very much effort based, "We both put as much effort as we can into the marriage," and "Maintaining the relationship is...putting in effort to for success." And other participants shared its inherent communication, "It's not a verbal thing. It's just, we're in this life together," and, "We don't talk about it. We just do what we do because it's now how our relationship has evolved." There were eight sub-codes that emerged under this theme: *acts of service, talk, shared passions, emotional support, humor, affirmation, day-to-day, and large life events*. Acts of service was the most saturated sub-code of maintaining the relationship.

The first and most saturated sub-code that emerged under maintaining relationships was *acts of service* which is demonstrating commitment through acts that benefit one's partner. This was by far the most saturated sub-code under maintaining commitment. Some shared that doing an activity together communicated commitment within their partnership, one example being, "When we were first married and his mom and dad got him a guitar and he started learning to play guitar and I started feeling a little bit threatened that he was gonna, you know, break away and be always wanting to play music with friends. But what he did instead was find me a guitar so that I could learn to play music and we could do this together." Half the participants disclosed they had been in a long-distance relationship at some point with their current partner and described the

effort to communicate and see each other as an act of commitment. One married man said, “The thing that she did is when we were dating, she drove an hour and a half, almost every weekend to see me. So that's a pretty good indication of commitment, is it not?” An engaged female shared, “Some semesters or seasons I was coming home more, I had more going on in [my town] so he would come there. It was, like, pretty mutual but it kind of like varied.” Several participants shared that they did chores or provided instrumental support as an act of commitment, “Small acts of service. So, like cleaning up dinner or, you know, I'll do one of the chores... little things like that giving, giving time and attention to, to the fact that we're in a relationship.” I thought the phrase “giving time and attention to the fact that we're in a relationship” was a really good summary for this theme and coincided with interdependence theory constructs of paying attention to a partner's needs. Other examples of this sub-code include, “He'll randomly fill up the car with gas,” “If I'm missing something that I need, he'll go to the store and get it,” “I changed the oil in your car,” “I've bought special food for you,” “I make coffee every morning,” and “I look at things to help make his life easier and vice versa.” It was clear throughout the participants answers that these individuals were really aiming to show their partner their commitment, as well as care, appreciation, and love. Many of the acts of service could also go under the *day-to-day/little things* sub-code of maintaining the relationship as well.

The second sub-code that emerged under maintaining relationships was *talk/communication throughout the day* which is demonstrating one's commitment through talking and discussions. This was the second most-saturated sub-code under maintaining the relationship. Many participants shared they talk to their partner both

every day and throughout the day, “I’m just communicating all day, every day,” “We communicate through Slack while we are at work,” “If I’m just missing him, I’ll shoot him a text or he’ll shoot me a text,” and “We do talk during the day if anything important comes up we’ll definitely text.” Some participants also described that talking a lot at the beginning of their relationship helped their communication as their relationship developed. “That’s kind of like how our relationship started was just like talking all the time.” Many participants shared that how they talked (in person, phone, video chat) and what they talked about changed a lot throughout their journey, but they still, and always, talk to their partners.

The third sub-code that emerged under maintaining relationships was *shared passions/activities* which is a commonality in passions or interests the two partners share. One woman disclosed this was the best way they maintained their relationship through health issues, kids, and life hardships. She shared, “Find a passion that you share that’s not physical, not, not a sexual passion. Find something that the two of you love so much that it can carry you through all the things you do.” Many participants shared that spending time together and sharing activities was an easy way to communicate their continued commitment. Participants said, “I would just do things together all the time,” “We just like to go out to eat, do things together. I don’t know, just make sure we spend time together,” and “We make sure we spend time together.” It could be concluded that finding a shared activity or passion to do together communicates commitment to the partner and their future.

The fourth sub-code that emerged under maintaining relationships was *emotional support*, which is one partner listening to another’s emotions without judgement or

ridicule and providing support in return. Some emotional support examples were in simple day-to-day conversations. One female participant shared, “Like last night I was complaining about something and he just let me vent and I was like, thank you for letting me do that and he's always like, ‘anything for you, I want you to be happy and to support you’ and....this morning he said, ‘I want you to be happy.’” Some individuals shared they liked the freedom to discuss their emotions with their partner, “I would say I'm very like emotional... I discuss my emotions very openly with her.” Two female participants both shared they desired a safe space with their partner to express their emotions and be supported, “So it was really safe to share like what was happening and how I was feeling about it,” and another said, “It's a safe place to, to express feelings even if it's like anger at the other person, like we know that we're going to get past it.”

The findings and interpretations from regarding emotional support also align with commitment themes from Weber, Johnson, and Corrigan (2004) and Weber and Patterson (1996). Weber et al., (2004) discussed how emotional support is assumed important for successful relationships, but there is limited empirical evidence to support this.

Psychology looks at this type of support as emotional support whereas some of the communication scholarship sees this construct as social support. There is definitely a difference in social support and emotional support, so for this discussion emotional support is defined as expressions of concern, compassion, and nurturing to one's commitment partner (Hill, 1987; Weber, Johnson & Corrigan, 2004; Wills, 1985). This study previously defined emotional support as “when one partner listens to another's emotions without judgement or ridicule and provides support in return,” and would like

to pair this with the literature definition to create a deeper understanding for the reader of what emotional support is.

Some more examples of emotional support from this study include, “It’s a safe place to, to express feelings” and “I will back you up; I will be there for you.” While the sample size for this study was not large enough to make a significant stride forward for emotional support in communication of commitment, it still provided some interesting and nuanced insights on how emotional support is employed in committed, romantic relationships. I also wondered if there were any correlations for emotional support in opposite-sex close partnerships in general, as Leverenz and Brann (2018) also found evidence of emotional support as an important aspect in opposite-sex friendships. It would be interesting to explore how emotional support is sought and provided within the same-sex, within the opposite-sex, and throughout different relationships. It would also be interesting to explore how one individual seeks and receives emotional support from the various close relationships in their life and how the support from the varied relationships balance and support the individual.

The fifth sub-code that emerged under maintaining the relationship was the *use of jokes/humor*, which is the qualities of being amusing or comic. There were many examples of the various ways humor was used to express commitment in the relationship. Some examples include, “We definitely play around in our relationship,” “We have a lot of like inside jokes and we just like to be funny and tease each other,” “I just think that our relationship works because we talk and joke and make fun and none of us are really too serious,” And “Everything comes about in a joking manner. I don’t know. It seems to

be lighter and easier for us.” In general, participants shared that jokes and humor were a light way to bring up more serious topics, and an enjoyable aspect of their relationship.

Previous research looks at the use of interpersonal humor during tough times (Booth-Butterfield et al., 2014) and as a means of better communicating in a medical setting (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2018). Sidelinger and Madlock (2013) explore the areas of teasing within the relationship and the potential positive and negative effects. However, I did not find any research in the area of jokes and humor as a means of communicating commitment within the interpersonal relationship. The participants in this study used jokes and humor to highlight everything from inside jokes and teasing the partner to hinting the relationship had no end and they were “stuck” to expressing just a general playfulness within the relationship. This is definitely an area that could be further explored by the discipline.

The sixth sub-code that emerged under maintaining relationships was *affirmation*, which is an expression of approval, affirmation, or admiration. Several participants expressed they provided affirmation to their partner or felt that their partner liked affirmation, and shared examples of receiving affirmation from their partner. For example, “He appreciates the verbal appreciation, the verbal acknowledgment of his acts of kindness,” and “She tells me she appreciates me and most of the time she's very grateful, very thankful for stuff that I do.” This example was actually from a married couple that were both individually interviewed in this study. The female participant shared that her husband liked verbal appreciation and the male participant shared that he receives that affirmation. Expressions of affirmation range from small day-to-day appreciation to serious commitment claims, “She tells me she thanks me all the time for

getting the chores or helping out where I can,” and “I tell her I couldn't live without her and I couldn't function without her.” In general, all participants shared they provided and received affirmation and thanks in their relationship, “We show each other appreciation or say thank you.” I found it very nice that the participants made sure to express appreciation to their partner, no matter how long they had been together. They didn't seem to take this for granted.

The seventh sub-code that emerged under maintaining relationships was *day-to-day interactions/small things* which is described as communication that happens on a daily basis between partners. There were many variations of day-to-day acts that communicate commitment, “It's little things every day,” “It's little things that we do or say each day,” “If I pick up dinner for myself and then get something extra for him that I know he would like,” and “Making sure to say good morning and good night.” One participant shared it was the little things that actually made her feel like a priority, “What gets us through are just the little things on the day-to-day...to know that I'm not just an afterthought, that, you know, our marriage is not only really important on our anniversary is, or when big things come around.” The woman who shared this quote used a very meaningful tone that made the weight of this quote all the clearer. Many items in this sub-code could also be coded for commitment talks or acts, however it's important to highlight the specific sub-code of day-to-day and small things as it was expressed verbatim by many participants as a means to maintain the relationship.

The eighth sub-code that emerged under maintaining relationships was *big things/celebrations/large life events*, which is communication that happens on special events and milestones between partners. One married male shared, “I definitely buy her

flowers...usually flowers and cards [for our anniversary] ... and not shockingly food, some of her favorites, If I get the chance to purchase something. I think she'd like or cook her something that she'd like...I would definitely do that." Another married woman shared, "There's obviously the big things like, you know, going out for dinners on anniversaries and things like that." Though anniversaries and large life events could be perceived as significant in communication of commitment, it was actually the lowest ranked out of all the sub-codes in maintaining the relationship. However, it was the easiest item for the participants to identify. It could be concluded that having an event to associate the communication of commitment with helped the participant recall those expressions of commitment.

Long-term future

Expressing the desire for a long-term future comes from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's (1998) commitment global constructs (see Appendix 1). Every single participant shared examples of long-term plans, commitments, or shared goals with their partner. Whether it was deciding future plans together, "I think like now with him becoming a [physical therapist] and stuff, like I know that's for our future and for our commitment and stuff. Like at this point it's not just for him, it's for us and our future and everything. So that's how I know he's committed," or reviewing the life they had lived together so far, "It's gone beyond expressing the fact that we intend to stay together. It's gone to all the things that we've done to build that future together." It was very clear that discussing a long-term future inherently belongs to communicating commitment. Talks of the future was the most saturated category of long-term future commitment communication. And talks of the future weren't always about shared goals, but just

continued commitment, “Like we both talked about like wanting to live in Colorado, but I was like, Hey, I just want you to know like, if that's not where we ended up, like that's okay. Like I still want to be with you, and it doesn't really matter where we end up. Um, I sort of don't see a future without you in it,” said one participant. I noticed that the participants found it easier to discuss how they planned a long-term future with their partner than for them to discuss how they maintain the relationship. One participant actually switched her answers between the two after gaining a better understanding of their differences during her interview.

The first sub-code that emerged for desiring a long-term future was *talk/discussions of the future*, described as topics of verbal discussions that are about the couple's future plans. As previously mentioned, this was the most saturated category under long-term future. One participant shared, “We talk all the time about like where we want to go, like, what our goals are for like what our career goals in our, like what we want out of life.” Another said, “I think we're kind of constantly talk about like where we want to go in our lives. Then it's always like in a way that's like balance between like what she wants and what I want too.” Some found that other factors encouraged more future talks: “I talk about the future more than he does partly because I'm the more financially minded one of us” and “I might bring [the future] up more often, but that's just because I'm an anxious human. So, I just think about the future a lot.” And one woman shared discussions of future actually increased her relational satisfaction, another concept of the investment model, “I think what really makes us happy and strive to have a better relationship and be successful in a marriage is by having future things look forward to. And you're not just, you know, paying bills and busting out at work, but actually having

things to look forward to and doing them together.” It is worth noting that the interview questions were taken from the commitment global constructs of the investment model, but some participant answers still highlighted other constructs such as satisfaction and investment size.

The second sub-code that emerged for desiring a long-term future was *shared future goals*, which are described as something both partners want in the future: (e.g. kids, marriage, travel, location). Many participants listed marriage, family, and careers in this category. For example, “Like getting married, you know, having kids, stuff like that,” “We talk about the future, like, moving out, buying a house, having kids, that kind of thing,” and “I mean we’ve talked about how our, like we want to be able to retire kind of young so we can travel the world together.” Some had very specific shared goals, such as one participant and her partner both wanted to have “sustainable urban agriculture.” Some participants divulged that the shared goals improved their commitment to one another, “on the same page, same goals. So that helped us make the commitment better.” The couples who had been together longer were also able to discuss goals they had set and accomplished throughout the duration of their relationship.

The third sub-code that emerged for desiring a long-term future was *care of partner’s health/ well-being finances* which is making a point to communicate an interest in your partners well-being because you want them around for the rest of life. Part of commitment is knowing that there is a future together. It could be concluded that knowing the partner would be in their future would encourage the individual to care more about his/her health, well-being, and finances. One example was when a female participant said, “I’m making him go to the dentist and the doctor all the time.” Many

participants communicated they were involved in their partner's health and vice versa, "Discussing things like, having a health issue and him coming to me and saying, 'okay, how can I help you feel better and help you manage your health?'" Another married female participant with a chronic illness shared, "He's taken over some duties to help me with my health. So that's showing me his commitment to me." There was not previous reference to care of the partner's health and well-being in the literature I reviewed for this study, and I found this to be a fascinating development.

The fourth sub-code that emerged for desiring a long-term future was *acts of a desired future*, these are nonverbal behaviors that demonstrate a partner's intent to persist the relationship. The participants shared the "acts" of desired future happened more in the beginning of the relationship, like meeting their partner's friends and family. There were also examples of buying food for future trips or tickets to future activities. One specific example was from a female in a dating relationship, "In his bedroom, like, he got a nice like comforter and sheets because he had his old you know, frat boy you know sheets. You know he got that for us, for my comfort, and also you know continuing our relationship in the future." This relates directly to the investment model construct of investment size. As discussed in the literature review, investment refers to the resources attached to a relationship that could be lost after the relationship ends. The participants described this concept by mentioning the integration of friends and family, as well as tangible items such as money, bedsheets, food, concert tickets, etc. Although the construct of investment is separate from commitment in the investment model, it is interesting to see how the constructs intertwine throughout.

One particularly intriguing item to note is that two married participants brought up death as a part of their long-term future communication. The participants shared, “We’ve talked about life support, how we want to die,” and “We’ve talked about, you know, at what stage do we want the DNR and when we die.” In a slightly different context, a married female participant said, “We’ve like talked about the fact that like neither one of us wants to have to live without the other one, so we want to die at the same time.” I did not expect the topic of death to come up in a study about commitment, and would be interested in exploring what this means for commitment.

Lack of desire to date another

Expressing the lack of desire to date another comes from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) commitment global constructs (see Appendix 1). This was the second lowest saturated category of the commitment global constructs and would not be covered except for the fact I specifically explored the four commitment global constructs. Many participants said this is not something they even think about or talk about. They shared being in the committed relationship inherently meant they were not interested in others, “Well, we’re committed to each other and therefore we’re not interested in talking about dating or...seeing other people,” “We made a vow to each other and we’ve been together almost 30 years, so it’s pretty much presumed that we’re not interested in dating other people,” and “I always knew that I never needed to worry and he was all mine.” Only one participant mentioned that her partner was truly the *only* person she could see herself spending her life with. And on the contrary, another participant even said he could see himself or his wife happily married to other people. This could be an example of how love and commitment differ; how individual’s perceptions of love can differ, but they can

still choose to be committed to their partner. This seemed to be a topic that the participants did not want to discuss; it was almost inherently understood that because they were with their partner that they did not want to be with others.

The first sub-code that emerged for lack of desire to date another was *conduct/actions*, which is a physical expression or act that demonstrates lack of interest in others. One participant shared she could tell her partner's lack of interest in others by his attention to her, "Going out in public with him and there's other guys, there's other girls, but he's always paying attention to me, like catering to my needs and my wants." One participant shared there is an openness in her relationship to discuss other attractive people, but it is known neither partner would act on these desires, "Oh, you know, you see a good looking individual, you say, oh, they're hot, but we would never act on those." Several participants shared more examples of the commitment expressions being more of conduct and individual morals of their partner that helped them know he/she is not interested in others. Some examples include, "Acting in a manner that would not give anyone the idea that we were open to someone else coming into our relationship" and "Not hanging out with people in a way that would make them think that, hey, I'm available even though I'm married." This same participant noted that it is okay for her and her husband to hang out with people of the opposite sex as long as both partners are comfortable and feel the person meets their moral code. She also shared that if her partner spent too much time talking to another female and she felt uncomfortable, she would be able to express that to her partner and he would act accordingly.

The second sub-code that emerged for lack of desire to date another was *talk/verbal*, which is a verbal expression of lack of interest in other partners. The verbal

expressions that demonstrate lack of interest in others seemed to come more at the beginning of the relationship, “I would say when we verbally spoke up was in the beginning because you're new and you don't know the person even though you said you're exclusive boyfriend, girlfriend” and “I think the day he said *I'm all in* actually it was like, that was that. So yeah, everything's just a when and how from there.” One married female participant mentioned that her husband’s family had experienced some infidelity, which led to a conversation about not being interested in others, “We definitely talk about that just because we've had some family members experience some, uh, some cheating in their relationship and we talk about it openly and discuss like in the event it does happen. Like what, how we feel if we are ever in that predicament.” There was only one mention of infidelity within the context of the interviews. Again, this seemed to be a topic the participants did not want to discuss.

Sadness of relational end

Expressing sadness if the relationship were to end comes from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) commitment global constructs (see Appendix 1). This was the lowest saturated category of the commitment global constructs and would not be covered except for the fact I specifically explored the four commitment global constructs. Most participants shared they just prefer not to talk about the end of the relationship. And almost all participants said they never thought of their relationship ending, “It never even crosses my mind [that the relationship could end],” and “But I never in my mind, ever thought that would be the possibility just from his character and our experience together.” Another example is, “[There’s] really no point in thinking about it cause it's unrealistic at this point,” which I found fascinating because this was the woman in the three month

dating relationship; where early dating would be the ideal time to end the commitment, if desired. One married woman said “hell would freeze over” before her wife would leave her. I think it could be concluded from the responses that part of commitment is assuming the relationship won’t end.

The first sub-code that emerged for sadness of relational end was *humor*, which is qualities of being amusing or comic. I did not see any examples of humor for long-term future, but I did see this theme present in communicating commitment and maintaining the relationship, with one example of humor in a “celebrity sex list” that did not warrant a code for lack of interest in others. One example of using humor to communicate sadness of the relational end is “We joke, you know, all the time like, Oh, you're stuck with me...can't get rid of me now. Like I'm in it until I'm dead. And so, even though it's a joke, like we both mean it too.” Joking seemed to be an easier way to approach the more challenging topics within the relationship.

The second sub-code that emerged for sadness of relational end was *companionship* which is a person whom one spends a large amount of time with. Two examples provided by participants were, “I hate to say [we are] dependent on each other because I know he's more dependent on me than I am on him. Um, but I depend on him as well because I'm not, I know I'm not lonely,” and another said, “I still have companionship.” Ideally, companionship is an inherent part of a close, interpersonal relationship. This goes back to the basic human needs of food, water, shelter, and companionship, as described in the introduction.

Overall, it was clear that Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) commitment global constructs (see Appendix 1) of maintaining the relationship and desiring a long-term

future were directly related to creating a lasting, committed relationship. There was an inherent knowledge of the partners that the commitment existed at every level from dating a few months to married for 45 years. The global constructs of lack of desire to date another and sadness of the relational end were minimally discussed by the participants. Most people felt these topics were sad and not something they needed, nor wanted, to discuss with their partner or me.

RQ2

To address research question two, *How do individuals interpret messages of commitment they receive from their partner?*, the iterative analysis revealed seven themes: *verbal/talk, nonverbal behaviors, clarity, learning, authenticity, trust/character, and mental capabilities*. Nonverbal behaviors was the most saturated code regarding recognizing and interpreting messaging, with trust and character as the second most saturated. It could be concluded from these findings that learning the nonverbal behaviors of one's partner and getting a sense of their character and trustworthiness is the best way to interpret messages accurately. The findings also demonstrate how important it is for the partner to ask for clarity if and when there is confusion on the message. Table 5 provides a summary of the responses related to RQ2.

Table 5. How individuals interpret commitment messages: codes, descriptions, examples

Code	Description	Examples
<i>Nonverbal behaviors</i> <i>*most saturated</i>	Body language, tone, facial expressions, speech patterns, unspoken understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • So body language is just, you know, if it's open and he's upbeat in his hands and stuff from everything, when he's telling the story, I can tell he's in a good mood. • There's times when he knows just by my body language
<i>Learning</i>	Spending more time and paying more attention to partners and their habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's called learning curve and we're learning to communicate with each other.
<i>Clarity</i>	Making an effort to ensure the message was received clearly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For whatever reason I do misinterpret or something like that comes along...he's very good about letting me know what's going on.
<i>Trust / Character</i>	Belief in the truth, reliability and honesty of another, a regard for the partner's feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I know that he's good to other people and like I can trust that he's going to be good to me too and better
<i>Authenticity</i>	Both sending and perceiving the message as genuine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He's not actually going out seeking recognition or, um, what's the word I'm looking for? Compensation for what he does.
<i>Verbal / Talk</i>	A verbal expression of a message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm definitely more verbal • I talk about it more
<i>Mental Capabilities</i>	When a mental disorder exists that prevents or inhibits a person's understanding or expressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There's some things that I don't get and I know that I don't get it particularly like she has ADHD...that impacts like how her brain kind of processes things and like, I don't really like, I can't empathize with that because I don't know what that's like.

The first and most saturated theme that emerged for recognizing and interpreting messages was *nonverbal behaviors* which is body language, tone, facial expressions, speech patterns, unspoken understanding. This was by far the most saturated code. This theme truly seems to be the most reliable way to interpret a message. It is also interesting to note that nonverbal behaviors were described solely as a way to interpret a message and was not present under the first research question. Some participants shared it took some time to learn their partner's nonverbal behaviors. There were several examples of the participants reading their partner's body language, "Just knowing his body language, knowing the way he uses words, if he changes his speech pattern," and "It's just like, I can tell his mood has changed from his normal outgoing personality." Many felt that their partner could read them, "There's times when he knows just by my body language...how I'm feeling," and "She can read me really well. And I think if I ever try to hide something from her... she could read me like a book." Some participants discussed how their partner acted differently with others than with them "Like watching him interact with other people. Like, I mean I can tell when he, isn't it like, I don't know... comfortable," and "When she talks on the phone to a stranger, her voice elevates in pitch. So, she started talking to me like that. I might wonder if she was like, fine?" Some participants shared that noticing a change or shift in the body language was a message in itself, "So she came in and she was quiet, stand-offish, not engaging, because she wasn't happy [with what had happened]" or, "I can tell when he gets to the point where he feels like he needs some appreciation." One married woman mentioned that the same nonverbal behavior can sometimes mean two different things, "So sarcastic is normally a good thing, but it can, when I could tell something's bothering him, it can be an issue with

something.” Another key thing to mention would be that a married woman who mentioned her husband had cognitive issues said that he could still interpret her messages by her body language alone; they have also been married 45 years.

There were not many references to nonverbal communication in the literature review for this study, however there were many situations of nonverbal communication disclosed by the participants. It is understood that nonverbal behaviors are essential to communicate commitment and understand accurately, but it is even clearer now how important nonverbal behaviors are in committed relationships for making meaning. The literature review did highlight that commitment communication could be indirectly communicated (Knapp & Taylor, 1994). To extend that concept (of indirect communication) and closer relate to the participant answers in the study, it is important to add that “being known and understood...forms the backbone of lasting satisfying relationships,” (Andersen & Przybylinski, 2018, p. 42), with satisfaction in the investment model (see Figure 1) directly related to commitment. The more satisfaction one has with their partner, the more likely they are committed, and the greater likelihood that the relationship will persist.

Nonverbal behaviors are not just body language, tone, posture, gestures, and facial expressions, they can also be the “way we use space and time in our relationship with others” (Gonzalez, 1978, p. 205). It became apparent throughout the transcription, coding, and analysis processes in this study that the longer the relationship duration, the more the participant discussed nonverbal behaviors. An example that makes this outwardly clear was when the woman who was oldest participant and had a marriage with the longest duration, shared that her husband had cognitive issues, yet he was still able to

understand when she was scared, happy, sad, or otherwise. Her husband of 45 years was able to tell what she was communicating not only from her tone and body language, but from the time and years in his relationship with her. It would be interesting to explore how cognitive issues affect reception and interpretation of messages and if that can be combatted with time. It would also be interesting to see if the woman intentionally changed her communication as the cognitive issues progressed, and why she chose to stay committed even though he had the cognitive issues. The woman disclosed that the issues came about later in their relationships when their children were of adult age, which means they would have been together at least 18 years at the time. And if I were to speculate the motivations for this could be related to the investment model as well, (e.g. even though the relational satisfaction may have lowered due to these cognitive issues, the woman's investment in the relationship or low quality of alternatives could've reinforced her commitment). However, there could be a variety of other factors (i.e. religion, family) that influenced this choice as well as or instead, and would be interesting to further explore.

Regarding both general and nuanced nonverbal behaviors expressed in this study, it is clear that knowledge, awareness, and understanding of one's partner's nonverbal behaviors increased the likelihood of successfully perceived commitment. And commitment communication that is accurately perceived and understood by both parties can predict relational stability and quality (Adam & Jones 1999; Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Rusbult, 1983; Sacher & Fine, 1996). Those who do not have the ability to effectively use their nonverbal channels tend to have less rewarding interpersonal interactions (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Sabatelli, Buck, & Dreyer, 1983). All the

participants in this study were in successful committed relationships and were able to articulate how nonverbal behaviors played a role in both sending and interpreting messages. It would be interesting to explore nonverbal behaviors within the various contexts described in the study.

The second theme that emerged for recognizing and interpreting messages was *learning*, which is spending more time and paying attention one's partner. I felt that learning about one's partner and using that to influence future decisions was a direct relation to interdependence theory constructs and a communicator of commitment within itself. The theme of learning was discussed more by the participants when describing the early years of the committed relationship. Many participants expressed that as time goes on, they learn more about their partner's intended messages, "Over the years we have learned what each person is trying to say and...we have kind of merged our stuff in the beginning as we have grown as a people, as adults, as a couple," "We are a much better communicators now and understand each other and 29 or 32 years later than we did when we were together for three years," and, "It took some learning in the beginning. Maybe the first four to five, maybe even the first 10 years." The length of time together really seemed to be an indicator of how much the participant learned about their partner's messages, "Certainly after you've been with someone for any length of time, you have a much better understanding of how they think, what they think, why they think, et cetera." A few participants even used the words "learn" or "learning" in their descriptions, "I've learned things about him that affect how he communicates," and, "It's called learning curve and we're learning to communicate with each other." Overall, I thought the concept of learning was really important to this study because taking the time

to learn about one's partner and using it to direct future interactions demonstrating commitment is a practical and beneficial way. Interpretation really depends on the communication patterns within the relationship, the dependability of the partner, and the time spent learning how the partner communicates. The learning aspects allow one to predict their partner's behavior and understand their commitment messages.

An example of learning aspects would be when one woman in the study expressed how it is a challenge to gain her husband's full attention. She shared, "I'd say the one piece that's difficult is getting that full attention and putting that phone down, putting that computer down...and let's just have one on one eye contact." She knows from learning within their relationship that his lack of focus is not a lack of interest or attraction to her, but rather something that fits into his personality as an information technology "nerd" and love for electronics. This claim was made even more interesting when I interviewed this participant's husband. The husband brought both a laptop and headphones to the interview (neither of which were requested, required, or necessary). And he also checked messages on his phone and smart watch throughout the interview. The reason for the constant checking of technology was unbeknownst to me, and frankly it was frustrating, but as I was transcribing, I was able to learn from his wife and realize that these qualities, while frustrating, were a part of what made this man who he was. His wife of six years held the relational knowledge that allowed her to understand and predict her partner's behavior, while I did not.

The third theme that emerged for recognizing and interpreting messages was *clarity* which is making an effort to ensure the message was received clearly. All the couples interviewed for this study said when they feel they misunderstood something or

there was a miscommunication, they address it immediately. Some examples include, “There’ve been moments if we’ve misinterpreted something, we’re pretty good about like saying it and like talking to each other about it rather than just like letting it go. She’s probably better at that than me,” “There are other times when I’m like, Hey...and ask for clarification either because of like hurt my feelings or like something else or like I like don’t understand what she means so I’ll ask,” and, “For whatever reason I do misinterpret or something like that comes along where maybe I, I’m not reading the signs correctly, he’s very good about letting me know what’s going on.” It could be assumed that couples who volunteer for a study on communication of commitment would have better communication skills than your average couple.

The fourth theme that emerged for recognizing and interpreting messages was *trust/character/respect* which is belief in the truth, reliability and honesty of another, and holding a regard for the partner’s feelings. Trust and character could also be linked with the authenticity and learning categories but was kept separately intentionally to highlight the nuances. Some participants highlighted that mutual respect helped them know that they were receiving the messages correctly, “We both respect each other,” “He needed to respect my feelings,” and, “So it’s respecting each other and then communicating if either one of us feels uncomfortable about a person who might be hanging with.” Another word used often by participants was “trust,” “I know that he’s good to other people and like I can trust that he’s going to be good to me too and better” and “It was easy to trust it because we had, you know, spent so much time getting to know each other in the beginning.” Other words such as safe, honest, morals, and character were also used in the quotations under this theme. It could be concluded that an individual who holds these

attributes is more likely to be in a successful, committed, monogamous relationship than someone who is sketchy, untrustworthy, unaccountable, etc.

The fifth theme that emerged for recognizing and interpreting messages was *authenticity*, which is both sending and perceiving the message as genuine. Perceiving messages as authentic is a very large focus in interpersonal communication and in the investment model. There were a few examples regarding recognition-seeking, “He does them without seeking recognition,” and, “He's not actually going out seeking recognition or, um, what's the word I'm looking for? Compensation for what he does.” Another participant shared she could tell the message was authentic due to how “natural” it was, “It was like this completely natural thing.” This theme was strongly linked to the nonverbal behaviors theme examples as well. It could be concluded that the participants are only committed to someone whom they felt was authentic. Having an understanding of authenticity within the relationship sets the groundwork for the other commitment constructs to build upon.

The sixth theme that emerged for recognizing and interpreting messages was *verbal/talk* which is the verbal expression of the message. One married female explained her partner had very clear communication, making it easy to interpret, “99% of the time I understand what my partner is saying because he's very clear cut and communication.” Ironically the words used to deliver a message were not discussed much in the topic of interpreting messages. The participants did share that it was easier to understand verbal expressions versus actions, but overall this theme was not overly saturated.

The seventh and final theme that emerged for recognizing and interpreting messages was *mental capabilities* which is when a mental disorder exists that prevents or

inhibits a person's understanding or expressions. This is important to highlight under interpreting messages because having full mental ability allows you to interpret messages most accurately. In this study, we had one woman discuss a partner with multiple sclerosis (MS)/cognitive issues, and two women mention partners with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The woman with the husband with MS shared that he mostly interprets her messages using nonverbal behaviors, "There's a lot of times when he doesn't understand exactly what I'm saying and I think that's, that's a cognitive thing, but he always gets the body language in the tone of voice always. There's no doubt there." Then she also explained sometimes she has to use context clues to help understand his messages. "It's hard for us because he has cognitive issues, so I really have to interpret what he says," she shared. One female participant shared even grocery shopping can sometimes lead to the need for clarity of her partner with ADHD's messages, "Like for example tonight we were talking about grocery shopping. I was talking about one meal, and he was talking about another meal, and he'd already gone past and I'm like woah, woah, come back, oh, like. That's a big factor in communicating with him." This is a great example of the couple communicating to gain clarity as well. Another female participant shared that getting her wife to schedule appointments can be challenging with her ADHD diagnosis, "She has a really, really hard time scheduling appointments and I have a hard time because when I remind her to do things, I feel like I'm nagging her." She also explained that knowing the ADHD diagnosis actually helps her better understand her wife's actions, "People might associate like not scheduling appointments, like a fear of talking on the phone, which you know, might be part of it, but with laziness or forgetfulness. But that's not really what's happening with her." This

could potentially show that awareness of a communication inhibitor is another step of interpreting and receiving messages.

Expressing commitment in paired couples

One thing that was interesting in the study overall was that there were four pairs, i.e. eight individuals, in the participant population. There was an engaged heterosexual couple, two married heterosexual couples, and one married lesbian couple. Having four pairs was particularly fascinating, especially in relationship to the interpreting messages research question, because often times the individuals in the partnership would explain the same situation in their separate interviews. I felt it was a very successful demonstration of communicating commitment within the relationship when both individuals in the pair explained the same scenarios in regard to the same questions. It showed a deeper understanding of what commitment meant within the couple, how it was expressed, and mutually understood by the pair. Consequently, if they discussed different aspects, it could be a sign of miscommunication within the relationship.

One example of a pair mutually understanding communication of commitment was in the affirmation sub-code under maintaining the relationship. The married woman explained how her partner needs verbal appreciation, and her husband shared she tells him she appreciates him and is grateful. This same couple also used similar phrases throughout the other interview questions. A few examples include, “We choose each other every day,” “We are true best friends,” and “For the best of both of us.” The wife in this couple also said that her husband had “straight-forward” and “black and white” communication and her husband said, “I’m pretty easy to understand and I’m pretty straight forward,” demonstrating that she could accurately identify her husband’s

communication. They also both discussed how the husband was sarcastic, and how they work together to navigate her chronic health issues. This couple had been together 32 years and married for almost 30 of those years. They spoke of one another with high regard and care. I could tell there was love and care within the relationship and the individuals were truly valued. It is also interesting to note that I interviewed the wife three weeks before the husband and their answers still matched, so the context of similar timing was not the causation for these similar answers. It was perceived as a true understanding of commitment within the pair.

Another example of a pair mutually understanding commitment within the relationship would be when the lesbian couple both described how they communicated their commitment in the early years of their relationship when they navigated long-distance. It is interesting to note they both discussed the beginning of the relationship even though they had been together 10 years by the dates of the interviews. One partner shared, “The beginning of our relationship was long distance. So, we spent a lot of time on the phone...talking to each other... like every day we talked,” and the other said, “Because we were long distance at the time and we're going to be for a while...so we talked on the phone a lot.” It was concluded that both women in the pair really felt that these initial phases of their relationship helped create the strong foundation they built today. Talking on the phone and working through long-distance was viewed by the pair as both verbally sharing and showing their commitment early on. Consequently, had they not had the trust and communication in the initial phases of their relationship, they might not have made it to the current 10-year mark. This couple also both discussed how they are aware of each other’s anxieties and insecurities and really make a point to take that

into consideration when sending and receiving their messages. These examples demonstrate a clear awareness and consideration of one's partner throughout the lifecycle of the committed relationship.

The engaged heterosexual couple also shared an understanding of their communication of commitment through long-distance. The couple shared that they were long-distance throughout their college years and how they employed phones and video chat to help communicate their commitment to each other. They had lived in the same town for high school and made the decision to go to separate colleges, though it would be challenging for them. The male shared that he heavily considered transferring after his first year, but they mutually decided they would both graduate in three years instead. The woman actually suggested this idea first. They visited each other as much as possible throughout their time apart and moved to the same city as soon as possible after graduation. However, their parents did not want them to live together so they purchased separate apartments in the same complex so they could see each other frequently. It wasn't until after their engagement that they moved in together. This couple was interviewed as a pair, and the dynamic between them was quite fascinating. The male was very sarcastic and joking, but he also seemed the more sensitive and emotional of the two. The woman was very sure of herself and clearly the dominant personality of the two. This personality assessment by me was reaffirmed by the reasoning the couple wanted to be interviewed together. The male expressed he did not feel he would be as successful in the interview without his partner there to help. It was very clear they made all their decisions together, which is an expression of commitment within itself.

Lifecycle of interpersonal commitment

This study had a wide range of length of commitment time, with 10 of the 12 relationships discussed lasting 6 to 45 years. Interviewing couples with such long-lasting relationships really demonstrated how communication of commitment is a journey throughout the relationship, something that is continuous. And it is also something that is ever evolving. The 10 committed couples all described their communication of commitment in the early parts of the relationship different than how they communicate commitment now. Many of these couples expressed that in the initial years of their relationship, it took a lot more verbal discussion and learning. They said things like, “It took some learning in the beginning,” and “There’s a learning curve.” Demonstrating that communication of commitment is something that takes time and attention to really identify, understand, and interpret. Many of these participant’s answers the commitment questions with their most recent examples of communication of commitment (e.g. marriage, children, moving). But when probed, they thought back to the earlier years of the relationship and were able to shine some light on how they initially began to understand their partner’s commitment to them. I felt it would be interesting to explore the concept of a commitment lifecycle further.

One unique anecdote in regard to the commitment lifecycle was from the longest married participant, a woman married 45 years. She said she wanted to end her married relationship during their first year, “For the first year, I remember thinking I had really screwed up.” She then went on to explain, “I remember thinking, oh my gosh, I got to get out of this...I think the turning point might've been when I realized that it was as much me as it was him that had issues. You know, he wasn't always wrong... is the point I'm

trying to make here.” This quotation from her really highlights the importance of understanding that communication is not just what you say, but how you say it, who is receiving the message, and also the nature of a shared interaction. She explained that her relationship became better after realizing that she too was not communicating within the relationship. That time and communication helped create the life they live now with three children and many grandchildren. Research on the lifecycle of commitment could really look at how the initial years help shape the commitment foundation for the duration of a lifetime.

Another interesting anecdote regarding the lifecycle of commitment was from another married woman. She explained that it was the commitment communication during the defining times and hardships they endured together that gave her faith in the relationship, “Within our first year, year and a half, we moved across state lines... That was a huge ordeal to, you know, find our next place to live together and actually find a place to call home and a new state with no one we knew.” She also shared, “Within or second or third year of dating, we both lost our jobs within the same month or around that time frame. So, persevering and finding ways to... save money.” She also shared that they moved in the basement of a friend who had a family, and her partner decided to go back to college to get another degree. She expressed that during these early years and hard times, they were really able to learn a lot about each other, their needs, and communication preferences. Her husband described these same situations as “talks” and “lots of talks”. He was a man of few words during his interview, which is a bit ironic since he mentioned he and his wife having talks a lot. Though they expressed it differently, there was an inherent understanding by the couple that they were going to

stay together no matter what and it was more of a matter as to *how* and *when* they would get through these tough times than *if* they would. It truly did not seem like an option for either one of them to not be together. I found this couple fascinating because they went through a lot of these hard times when they were dating, which would be the easiest phase of the commitment lifecycle to leave. Yet both partners never expressed leaving as an option. They did meet on a dating app, which implies that they were looking for a relationship when they found each other. I wondered if the context in which their relationship was created influenced their levels of commitment as well.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study sought to better understand the communication of commitment in monogamous romantic relationships including how one communicates his/her commitment to his/her partner and how one interprets messages from their partner. The overall findings were that couples are communicating their commitment primarily in words and discussions, especially in the early stages of a committed relationships. The couples in this study employed the constructs of “maintaining the relationship” and discussing the “long-term future” as the primary communicators of commitment. In addition, nonverbal behaviors revealed themselves to be the primary way for an individual to interpret their partner’s message. Almost all participants disclosed they did not see an end to their relationship, nor did they ever think there was a possibility their relationship would end.

Implications of conclusions

There are a variety of conclusions that can be drawn from the interpretations of this study that have theoretical, methodological, and practical implications.

Theoretical implications

The findings and interpretations of this study really highlight how “between-person relations are as meaningful as the individual themselves” (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008, p. 2050; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003) and the interdependence structures (Thibaut & Kelley, 1978) that exist in current relationships/between-persons relations. More specifically, the participants highlighted the structure of interdependence theory. The participant answers drew attention to the focus of the *outcome* of an interaction between two individuals. There were several themes throughout the research questions that

involved authenticity, trust, character, and learning which really highlighted aspects of interdependence in a practical way. These themes and quotations from the interviews aligned with Van Lange and Rusbult's (2011) demonstration that an individual's decision making is influenced by the other person's needs and motives. One example was from a female in a dating relationship, "He's always paying attention to me, like catering to my needs and my wants." This quotation highlights a between-person interaction where the participant's boyfriend is considering his girlfriend's wants, needs, and desires throughout the time they are in public together. And from this interaction, the participant is able to receive the immediate benefits of her boyfriend's time and attention, but also the symbolic outcomes. The symbolic outcomes (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996; Van Lange & Rusbult, 2011) she receives in this scenario could be the feelings of attraction, attention, validation, or commitment.

In line with that concept, Thibaut and Kelley (1978) presented that individual motives are created within the interpersonal reality itself. The interpersonal reality or shared reality in interpersonal relationships can be best explained by Andersen and Przybylinski (2018) where they demonstrate that creating and maintaining shared beliefs/values creates a "shared reality" for the pair. These close interpersonal relationships create a shared reality by co-creating meaning with one another. Many of the participants in the longer committed relationships explained how they actively discussed their individual and collective motives with their partner to continually facilitate the commitment communication. One participant shared, "If there were times when we didn't [agree], it was just a matter of more and more discussion and understand that each other's point of view and coming up with a compromise because we were both

committed to each other in the family.” She shared this with me while discussing her and her husband’s choice to move homes and school districts. She wanted to move to another town, whereas he did not. She stated her case and he stated his. They then made a point to go tour various school districts and towns and continued the conversation of pros and cons throughout. The shared value and belief for this couple throughout was the importance of family and their children’s future. After much deliberation, the couple decided to move to another school district for better education and a safer community for their children. Even though the husband didn’t want to move because he liked having his friends near and a shorter commute to work, the couple’s shared reality was more important than the individual motivations. Our female participant shared that if they hadn’t come to the agreement to move school districts, they would have found another compromise and revisited the situation 6-12 months later.

The school district scenario could also relate to the situational selection section of interdependence theory, where the wife and husband made the choice to benefit their partner with limited self-sacrifice which seems like an elaborate way to say compromised. A high volume of successful situational selections are key to lasting and gratifying relationships. It would be interesting to explore the beginning stages of this particular relationship and see how they handled their situational selection prior to 30 years of learning about each other. I would guess that there were at least a few non-successful situational selections that the partners chose to learn from and redirect their behaviors for the future success of the relationship.

Methodological implications

The most interesting methodological development from this study is that it took a quantitative scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) and applied its commitment constructs to a qualitative study. That means I took an item that is normally scaled by a number on a Likert scale and further explored the nuances to assess how it plays out in real life scenarios. The qualitative framework was appropriate for a study on relationships as, “qualitative research is itself relational” (Tracy, 2013, p. 6). Qualitative research allows for exploration of context and circumstances of the data. It also allows for additional probing and clarifying any miscommunication or confusion.

There are many differences between quantitative and qualitative research that help demonstrate how conducting this as a qualitative study helped expand on the theory. For example, where quantitative research focuses more on the “how much” or “how often” (Tracy, 2013), qualitative research can actually describe the details of the scene. Qualitative research also allows for the researcher to be used as an instrument, which allows for the data to go through my mind in conjunction with the literature and past, similar research experiences. The representation of the method, results, and discussion is also presented differently between the two research methods. Because I was the instrument for qualitative research, the descriptions written in this paper were connected “into the stories, observations, and interactions collected” (Tracy, 2013, p. 25). In qualitative research, the writing can happen throughout the process and allows for a more dynamic and nuanced expansion of the theories, constructs, results, and discussions in the final piece.

The qualitative data for this study truly adds depth and nuance to the previous quantitative results, especially in the most saturated categories of maintaining the relationship and long-term future. It also was inherently clear with this particular dataset that the themes of interdependence theory and the investment model were interwoven throughout the results, though I only focused on the commitment constructions. Rubin et al. (2010) said, “Interviews can be combined with other research studies to confirm or explain research results,” (p. 221) and that claim can be similarly applied to the concept from which this research project grew. Though this study is not a mixed method study, it’s structure and concept are similar to a mixed method approach. Abbott (2004) also presented that some of the strongest research is mixed methods (i.e., both quantitative and qualitative). Other scholars (Rodgers & Thorson, 2003) have also seen successful, more nuanced results with the mixed methods approach. I feel the translation of the quantitative study and constructs to the qualitative demonstrates the communication of commitment and interpretation of messages in a clear, insightful, and structurally sound way.

Adding the qualitative study to previously quantitative research strengthens the findings and implications. This study confirms the existing literature and findings are important, provides detail about how the dimensions of interdependence and interpersonal commitment are constructed within interactions, and presents more nuanced examples of the commitment constructs. I would be interested to see what the results from this study would look like translated back into quantitative scales, and how much or how little they would match their original scales. I would also be interested to see how

the other investment model constructs (satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives) would look when studied in the same fashion as the commitment constructs in this study.

Practical implications

Aside from general relational tips, these findings could also be structured into learning materials for a variety of audiences. The topics that would be included in a more practical application of this research would be how to look for messages of commitment from one's partner in words, to focus on how communication of commitment changes throughout the relationship, and learn to understand a partner's nonverbal expressions to better interpret messages. There are a variety of ways this research could be translated for practical use. Some examples include translating it to educational materials on health relationships for the classroom; couples therapy exercises; online portals with relationship tips or modules, etc. One of the best practical applications would be something similar to an item that was expressed by three of the study participants, called "The Five Love Languages." This was shared by a married female participant. She said, "So love languages. I definitely made him take that test to figure out what makes him happy. Because you know, everyone takes love in a different way and having that love for one another and being aware of what they need is a commitment in itself. So, figuring out that he likes touching and affirmations, that's his way of feeling loved and just goes unity in a being committed to each other." This is the type of information that people are hungry for; people are seeking out existing options in hopes of bettering their relationships.

"The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate" is a book written by Gary Chapman in 1992. It has now been expanded to online

quizzes, podcasts, resources, and more. The Love Languages quiz results claim to share how the individual wants to receive and give love within the context of the five languages: acts of service, physical touch, gift giving, quality time, and words of affirmation. The general concept is that if one partner scores highest on an item such as quality time, their relational counterpart can try to provide more quality time to meet their needs, as mentioned by the participant in his study. Its creator, Chapman, holds a Ph.D. in adult education and works as a marriage counselor and pastor, however the information used to formulate this concept is not backed by theory or analysis with a formalized methodology. Though known as the “Love Languages,” upon further investigation, this instrument actually aims to identify commitment expressions to one’s partner. This book and its associated online resources are practical examples of helping people communicate their commitment, but it lacks the academic data it needs to be empirically sound and to identify what the masses use as commitment expressions.

Using data from this thesis study and similar, either in conjunction with the existing instrument or in creation of a new quiz, could provide the empirically sound and validated information to create a practical scale to help individuals communicate their commitment to their partner. It is very important to create a scale for general use that actually has theoretical rationale and academic research to support it to increase the likelihood of the success within the relationship. More often than not there are quizzes and scales that are not empirically sound or theoretically supported that the general public has access to, and this could prove detrimental to the relationship in some cases.

General implications

The current study is an attempt at understanding the fundamentals of communicating commitment within monogamous romantic relationships. There are many areas within the scholarship that this research adds value including the earlier scholarship that explored the foundation for this study, interdependence (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1978). In addition, the findings of this study contribute to the many perspectives of communication of relational commitment that exist within the current literature (Adam & Jones 1999; Aldrich & Morrison, 2010; Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1999; Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999; O’Riordan, 2007; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Sahlstein & Baxter, 2001; Thompson-Hays & Webb, 2004; Weigel, 2008; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2002) as well as the constructs of mutuality (Drigotas, Rusbult & Verette, 1999; Weigel, 2008) and emotional support (Weber, Johnson & Corrigan, 2004; Weber & Patterson, 1996).

There are also areas presented in the current literature that this research deepens and provides a more nuanced understanding of how commitment is communicated. Although current literature also explores interpersonal nonverbal behaviors (Andersen & Przybylinski, 2018; Gonzalez, 1978; Knapp & Taylor, 1994), this study further highlights their importance within the relationship and begins to discuss the context for understanding a partner’s nonverbal behaviors. It also begins to explore cognitive issues and how that affects the reception of the interpersonal messages. Furthermore, it presents data that shows sometimes *how* a person says something is more important than the words they use.

This study also reframes some previous research on commitment and the institution of marriage (Janis & Mann, 1997; Leik et al., 1999; Piland, 1984; Tallman et al., 1991) and presents it as a new concept, the outward communication of commitment. Additionally, the study lays the groundwork to better understand how outward communication of commitment can affect the interpersonal commitment and poses the question as to the level of intimacy that comes with interpersonal commitment, sharing the commitment to one or more individuals, and public sharing of the commitment.

Another area within communication of commitment that this study builds upon is the concept of jokes and humor. There is little work in this concept currently, and this study presents the use of humor and jokes as an emerging theme in the fundamentals of communicating commitment. A fourth of the participants in this study mentioned the use of humor and jokes to bring up more serious topics in the relationship. I did not find much notable work in the reviewed scholarship for this study that reviewed humor and jokes as a means to express commitment and think there is value in better understanding this as a practice.

As mentioned in the literature review, it is important for the scholarship to have an accepted, general understanding of how individuals are sending and receiving messages of commitment at a basic level to allow for more practical application. A practical application of this research would be translating the knowledge of relational commitment to people to improve their own relationships. This study highlights the importance of both talking about commitment and showing commitment to one's romantic partner. It also demonstrates that people should pay attention to the communication of their partner, especially the nonverbal communication. In general,

these findings could be implemented in relationships at the individual level. The time and attention paid by the individual will not only validate the commitment of the relationship but also give the partners the tools for a successful relationship to come.

This study not only provides additional data that reaffirms the understanding of interdependence theory and the investment model, but also presents additional constructs in the area of co-construction of commitment and the use of humor and jokes in commitment. The findings and interpretations of this study align with existing communication concepts such as emotional support and interpersonal trust. They also confirm that communication of commitment is an important part of a successful committed relationship and lightly touch on relational satisfaction.

Limitations

There are always boundaries of how far a study's conclusions can reach. There were limitations in the demographics of this study. This sample was primarily Caucasian and heterosexual, creating a lack of diversity in race and sexuality. Although the sample and size of 12 worked for the purpose of this study, the population could be tailored in a variety of ways (e.g., sample size, age, race, sexuality, relationship type) for future research to determine things like commitment differences in various ages, cultures, types of commitment, or commitment changes over the lifecycle.

The largest obstacle faced in this study was the challenge of bringing up the topic of commitment in a way that got the participants to be able to recognize it. There was clear difficulty for the participants when they were instructed to reflect on commitment as specific communication and employed behaviors. Even though commitment was defined for each participant, they still froze every time the first question, *Describe in some detail*

a time when you said or did something that communicated your commitment to your partner, was asked. There are a variety of reasons why this could be, and efforts should be made in the future to aid participants in their understanding and recollection of commitment within their relationship, or the study should be designed where the participants are logging their commitment efforts as they are happening in real time.

Future directions

This study provides a foundation for future study of communication of commitment. One way to expand upon this framework would be to find a more diverse population in race, culture, and sexuality. However, there are benefits to both having a larger, more general sample and a focused smaller sample on a specific demographic. Both directions would take the findings from this research to new heights. Future research could look at different variations within age, race, culture, etc. and between difference ages, races, cultures, etc. It could also use dyadic interviews or experiments to explore social interactions.

Another possible direction from this study on commitment would be to have participants track their current and future communication of commitment instead of bringing the past to one's conscious. In this study, participants found it difficult to think back throughout their relationship and identify the specific behaviors employed to communicate commitment, even though I defined the construct at the beginning of the interview. Explaining the types of behaviors to track and having individuals dynamically track these behaviors could prove more insightful on the day-to-day aspects of communicating commitment. Another possibility would be to conduct the study in more of an 'experiment' structure and observe the interactions throughout the day. It would be

interesting to do the interviews from this study with couples who had actually broken up and compare the different answers.

One area I am particularly interested in seeing this research expanded is the communication of commitment over the lifecycle of the relationship. This study had a wide variety of ages and relationship lengths; and noted much more communication of commitment in the initial years of the relationship, which could prove very important to understand. It would be worth exploring to see how the initial communication of commitment helps set the framework for the lasting relationship, and how the communication changes throughout.

Two more areas that could be easily expanded on from this study are cognitive issues (i.e. when a mental disorder exists that prevents or inhibits a person's understanding or expressions) and the outward communication of commitment (i.e. marriage, having children, in a relationship on social media, etc.). It would be interesting to see how cognitive issues affect the sending and receiving of messages, how the time leading up to the cognitive issue affects the relationship, how the diagnosis affects the relationship, and how the communication changes throughout. In addition, for the outward communication of commitment, it would be interesting to see the various levels of intimacy in communicating commitment to one's partner, communicating the commitment to one or more people outside the relationship, and communicating the commitment publicly. It would also be interesting to see if generations differ in the levels they feel are most intimate, and if the partners differ in their opinions.

Lastly, the positive and negative effects on humor within the commitment communication should be explored. Humor and jokes warranted codes under maintaining

the relationship and sadness if the relationship were to end. Understanding how to appropriately use humor to maintain the relationship and navigate difficult topics could prove beneficial on theoretical and practical levels.

Overall, this study set the framework to better understand the communication of commitment in monogamous romantic relationships. It is crucial for studies like this thesis to exist to help scholars and the public alike understand which relationships are worth continuing and how to ensure they continue. This study used sound literature and theories, including interdependence theory and the investment model, to demonstrate how couples communicate their commitment to each other in a variety of ways, with words/verbal expressions as the most reported strategy. It also demonstrated that actions and words geared to maintain the relationship can be the best way to communicate commitment to one's partner. Additionally, it highlighted the importance of nonverbal communication and sending and receiving expressions of commitment within the romantic dyad. Aside from the three primary findings, it highlighted many nuances within communication of commitment, provided examples for various communication constructs within commitment, and laid the groundwork for a variety of future commitment research. There was a call 20 years ago (Adams & Jones, 1999) to better understand commitment within these most important interpersonal relationships and this study made intentional strides toward that goal and provided significant findings and interpretations.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview constructs

Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) p. 366, Commitment Global Items

“I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.

I want our relationship to last for a very long time.

I feel very attached to our relationship-very strongly linked. . .

It is likely that I will date someone other than my partner . . . (-)

I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end . . . (-)

I want our relationship to last forever.

I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship”

These commitment global items were extracted from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) survey measuring the investment model constructs (commitment, satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives). The commitment global items were used to guide the interview questions because this study focuses solely on commitment without the other factors. These items provide a framework for understanding commitment, whereas the current study seeks to understand commitment communicated within the relationship and how it is interpreted. These items are sometimes expressed as “commitment global constructs” throughout the paper.

These items were rephrased into open ended questions in Appendix 2.

Appendix 2. Interview guide

IRB Protocol: # 1907194306 (Approved)

Welcome and Introduction

Hello, my name is Alaina Leverenz. I want to thank you for volunteering to be interviewed. Today, we will be discussing communication of commitment within your monogamous, romantic relationship. The intent of this study is to understand how individuals communicate commitment to their partner and how they feel their partner communicates commitment to them.

As you read in the study information sheet provided electronically prior to our meeting: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to answer all of the questions, and you can participate as little or as much as you would like. Please keep in mind that we will be talking about your experiences and opinions. There are no right or wrong answers – so I encourage you to be honest. Anything that you say will be held confidential, and we will not use anyone’s name in any written reports. Everything you say here will be used for research purposes. I hope that you will feel comfortable discussing your ideas and opinions.

Definition

For the purposes of our conversation the interviewer and interviewee will note the definition of commitment as: the intent to persist in the relationship and having feelings of psychological attachment (Rusbult, & Agnew, 1998; Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998).

1. Describe in some detail a time when you said or did something that communicated your commitment to your partner.

2. Describe in some detail a time when your partner said or did something to communicate his/her commitment to you.

- Do you and your partner communicate this in equal amounts? Or does one of you communicate this more? Why do you think this is?
- Do you and your partner communicate this in the same way? Why do you think this is?
- **What is something your partner could say or do to you to make you feel they are no longer committed?**

3. Research shows that part of commitment is expressing to your partner your desire to maintain your relationship, is that something you as a couple do?

- How your partner and your “desire to maintain a relationship” is communicated in your relationship?
- Do you and your partner communicate this in equal amounts? Or does one of you communicate this more? Why do you think this is?
- Do you and your partner communicate this in the same way? (i.e. saying or doing similar things) Why do you think this is?
- How do you make meaning out of your partner’s expressions of his/her desire to maintain the relationship? (i.e., are these messages always perceived as authentic, what contextual factors affect meaning making... e.g. like a partner reassuring one’s insecurities in the relationship, general positive comments in daily life, etc.).
- **What is something your partner could say or do to you to make you feel they no longer desire to be in the relationship?**

4. Research shows that part of commitment is expressing to your partner you do not want to date another/you would be sad if the relationship were to end, is that something you as a couple do?

- Do you and your partner communicate this in equal amounts? Or does one of you communicate this more? Why do you think this is?
- Do you and your partner communicate this in the same way? (i.e. saying or doing similar things) Why do you think this is?
- How do you make meaning out of your partner's expressions of his/her disinterest in dating another? (i.e., are these messages always perceived as authentic what contextual factors affect meaning making... e.g. a reassuring discussion over an individual you feel jealous/uncertain of, a partner's response to a passive aggressive comment regarding another, etc.).
- **What is something your partner could say or do to you to make you feel they do want to date someone else/would not be sad if your relationship ended?**

5. Research shows that part of commitment is expressing to your partner desire a long-term future as a couple, is that something you as a couple do?

- Do you and your partner communicate this in equal amounts? Or does one of you communicate this more? Why do you think this is?
- Do you and your partner communicate this in the same way? (i.e. saying or doing similar things) Why do you think this is?
- How do you make meaning out of your partner's expressions of his/her disinterest in dating another? (i.e., are these messages always perceived as authentic what contextual factors affect meaning making... e.g. like discussing future plans or

milestones like marriage, buying a home, creating a family, career choices, vacations, etc.).

- **What is something your partner could say or do to you to make you feel they no longer see a future with you?**

6. Do you feel you accurately understand what your partner expresses to you? Please explain why yes or no.

7. Do you feel your partner accurately understands what you express to them? Please explain why yes or no.

8. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix 3. Study information sheet

IRB Protocol: # 1907194306 (Approved)

INDIANA UNIVERSITY STUDY INFORMATION SHEET FOR

Communicating Commitment within Monogamous Romantic Relationships

You are invited to participate in a research study of how individuals in a monogamous relationship communicate their commitment to their partner.

The study is being conducted by Alaina Leverenz under the advisement of Dr. Elizabeth Goering from the Department of Communication Studies at IUPUI.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study is to better understand how individuals in a monogamous relationship communicate their commitment to their partner and how they perceive their partner communicates their commitment to them.

Procedures for the Study

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things: You will participate in an interview with the researcher in-person, over the phone, or through an online video chatting platform that will take about 60 minutes. The audio of this interview will be recorded. The researcher will use the process of member reflections; therefore, the researcher will email the participant following the interview to confirm the accuracy of the themes presented in the interview. The individual participant assessments of code accuracy may vary in length of time but should take no longer than two weeks time. If a participant has not responded to the member reflection email from the researcher after 7 days, the researcher will send a reminder email to complete the reflection step.

Performing the member reflection step will conclude the interaction with the participant.

It is projected to take no longer than 8-weeks from initial contact from the participant through the end of the member reflections step.

Risks and Benefits

The risks of participating in this research are the potential for being uncomfortable disclosing information about your romantic relationship. We cannot guarantee any direct benefits. The possible benefit of participating in this research is helping improve understanding about how actions you take effect on your relationship.

You will be asked questions about your experiences. You have the option to skip questions that you do not want to answer.

Confidentiality

Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. The only person who will have access to the interview recordings and notes are the two members of the research team. Any audio files and notes taken from the interviews will be stored in a password protected folder on a password protected computer; any potential identifying materials will be saved in a separate file location.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Indiana University Institutional Review Board or its designees, and any state or federal agencies who may need to access your research records (as allowed by law).

Payment

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

Contacts

For questions about the study, contact the advisor of the researcher, Dr. Elizabeth Goering. For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the IU Human Subjects Office.

Voluntary

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Indiana University or IUPUI.

This research is intended for individuals 18 years of age or older. If you are under age 18, you cannot participate in this research study.

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Curriculum Vitae

Alaina Nicole Leverenz

Education

- M.A. Indiana University degree, earned at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, January 2020
Major: Applied Communication
- B.S. *Magna Cum Laude*, William Woods University, May 2016
Double Major: Communication and Graphic Design

Teaching Experience

- Guest lecturer on human trafficking in metropolitan communities, ECON 3400-001: Economics of Sex and Drugs, University of Colorado Denver, September 2019

Conference Presentations

Leverenz, A. N., & Brann, M. (2018). "Communication at Work, not Play: An Exploratory Study of Self-Identified Heterosexuals' Professional Cross-Sex Friendships". Paper presented at the 104th National Communication Association Convention. Sponsored by the Interpersonal Communication Division. Salt Lake City, UT.

Conferences Attended

- National Communication Association Convention, 2018, Salt Lake City, UT
- National Communication Association Convention, 2017, Dallas, TX
- National Communication Association Convention, 2016, Philadelphia, PA

Academic and Professional Service

Service to Students

- Finance advisor, the Kappa Omega chapter of Alpha Chi Omega at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, 2016-19
- Philanthropy advisor, the Alpha Chi Chapter of Alpha Chi Omega at Butler University, 2016-19
- Panhellenic advisor, the Alpha Chi Chapter of Alpha Chi Omega at Butler University, 2016-19
- Sexual violence researcher and student liaison, under Dean of Student Life, Venita Mitchell, PhD, 2015-16

Service to University

- University of Colorado Denver | Anschutz representative for the Colorado Council of Graduate Schools, 2019-present
- University of Colorado Denver | Anschutz Graduate School representative on CU Equity and Diversity committee, 2019-present
- William Woods University representative on Coalition to End Rape and Domestic Violence (CARDV), Board of Directors, 2015-16

Service to Profession

- Conference paper submission reviewer, Applied Communication Division of National Communication Association, April 2019.

Professional Memberships

- National Communication Association
- International Association for Relationship Research
- Central States Communication Association

Honors and Awards

- William Woods University, Who's Who Among Students in American University and Colleges, Spring 2016
- William Woods University, Amy Shelton McNutt award, Spring 2016

Grants

- Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, Communication Studies, Department Travel grant, November 2018